

THE REAL LADY HILDA



B. M. CROKER

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THE REAL LADY HILDA

THE REAL LADY HILDA

A SKETCH

BY
B. M. CROKER

AUTHOR OF

"PRETTY MISS NEVILLE," "DIANA BARRINGTON," "MR. JERVIS," "PROPER PRIDE,"
"PEGGY OF THE BARTONS," "BEYOND THE PALE."

"On souffre quelquefois plus de la mort d'une illusion
que de la perte d'une réalité."

NEW YORK
F. M. BUCKLES & COMPANY
11 EAST 16TH STREET
LONDON—CHATTO & WINDUS
1899

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The Real Lady Hilda

18402
Mar. 11.99.

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THE REAL LADY HILDA.

CHAPTER I.

WAITING FOR THE LAMP.

“Too early for the lamp, I suppose, and yet too dark to read a line.” And my stepmother closed her novel, with an impatient snap, as she added, “This is the worst of these horrid, poky lodgings ; one never can have anything at the time one wants it. What a dismal little den it is, Gwen ! What possessed us to come here ? ”

I could have answered the question promptly and briefly in the single word

“ Poverty ; ” but, as it was a term my relative specially detested, I merely shrugged my shoulders, and continued to gaze into the miserable apology for a garden which ran between our quarters and the high street of Stonebrook, an insignificant market town in Sussex.

Certainly there was not much to see, amid the creeping shadows of a November afternoon. A dripping hen, wading carefully across the road ; a coal-cart, the driver enveloped in empty sacks ; and the undertaker’s retriever—black and curly, as an undertaker’s dog should be—sitting in his master’s doorway, and yawning most infectiously. If we had lived opposite to the post-office, the lending library, or even the hotel, we should have enjoyed a livelier outlook, but “ Mound & Son—Funeral Establishment — Coffins, Hearses, and every Requisite,” to quote from the in-

scription over the door, in rigid white characters on a mourning ground, afforded but a gloomy and dispiriting prospect. It was too dark to descry more than the outline of an ornamental sign, on which was depicted an elegant open glass vehicle, drawn by four prancing black horses, with nodding plumes and streaming tails—triumphant-looking steeds, who seemed to say, “Man treats most of us barbarously all our lives, then kills us, and makes money of our very skin and bones; it affords us sincere pleasure to carry him to the grave, and ‘see the last of him.’ ”

The interior of our sitting-room corresponded with its dreary view—a lodging-house apartment *pur et simple*, with narrow windows, hideous wall-paper, the inevitable round table, cheap chiffonier, and bulgy green rep sofa, to complete the picture. The fire was low, and unques-

tionably in a bad temper, emitting every now and then slow and sullen puffs of yellow smoke. It was raining hard outside, and at regular intervals an intrusive drop came spluttering down the chimney.

“Dear me, what a sigh!” exclaimed my stepmother. “Mariana in the Moated Grange could scarcely surpass it! Cheer up, Gwen; a girl of nineteen has no business to be melancholy—though I grant that you have some provocation. Never meet troubles half-way, that is my motto. I have an idea that our luck will turn soon: I saw two magpies to-day.”

I burst into a short, involuntary laugh.

“Oh yes, you may laugh, my old-head-on-young-shoulders, but I mean to have a regular good talk with the cards by and by; in the meanwhile, we will ring for the lamp and tea. Mrs. Gabb will say it

is too early, but I intend to brave her for once. Britons never shall be slaves ! ”

And she gave the bell a peal far more befitting the summons of a wealthy woman than of a reduced widow lady, who was going to dine on poached eggs, and was two weeks in arrears with her rent.

There was only a difference of twelve years between us, and Emma, as my step-mother wished me to call her, was a pretty little Irishwoman, with black hair, dark blue eyes (wonderful eyes and lashes), and a radiant smile. No more generous, hospitable, or impulsive creature ever breathed. She was, moreover, a determined optimist, who looked steadily at the bright side of things, and enjoyed extraordinary high spirits, and the comic (or sunny) view of life. Generally, she was to be seen on what is called “the top of the wave,” though, occasionally, there

came a terrible reaction, and she sank, overwhelmed, into the black abysmal depths which are the birthright of those who are endowed with a nervous, highly strung, mercurial temperament.

Two years previous to this dreary November day, my father had died in India, and six months later, Emma, having returned home, had summoned me from school to join her in London.

I had previously been given to understand that we were now very poor—my lessons had been curtailed, my mourning was inexpensive; I was therefore astonished to find my stepmother established in most luxurious lodgings in Sloane Street, for which she paid—it being the season—twelve guineas a week. These rooms were crammed with quantities of the choicest blooms, cut and in pots, for Emma was passionately fond of flowers—

she declared that she could not exist without them. Her weeds were as gloomy and superb as it was possible for weeds to be, and in no quarter was there the smallest hint of that detestable visitor who, when it comes in at the door, sends another inmate flying out through the window.

A smart *coupé* from the Coupé Company, called every afternoon, and took us out shopping and into the park ; Emma's ideas were apparently as magnificent as of yore. I was fitted out by "Ninette," her own milliner, in a black crépon and silk, and a large French picture-hat, with black ostrich feathers—expense absolutely *no* object. It was not for me, a girl of eighteen, to make inquiries respecting our finances. I took for granted that the phrase "left badly off" meant at least a thousand a year. Emma had imparted

to me that her auction had brought in a large sum, and that she expected the old Jam-Jam—meaning the Rajah of Jam-Jam-More—"to do something handsome for both of us."

Meanwhile we remained in Sloane Street, were extravagant in flowers, books, and *coupés*, and hospitable Emma hailed in every passing acquaintance to lunch, tea, or dinner. She had no plans, beyond a desire to remain in London and "look about her;" which looking about her signified the constant expectation of coming across the familiar faces of Eastern friends. Miserable mofussilite! poor deluded Emma! She had a foolish idea that the metropolis resembled a great Indian station, and that she could scarcely cross the road without meeting some one she knew.

Her special friends were not in Eng-

land. At the moment they had either just gone back, or were not coming home till next year. I noticed—not once, but repeatedly—that when we encountered her mere acquaintances, and they asked where we were living, an expression of significant astonishment was visible in their faces the moment our address was mentioned. I also noted an increased cordiality of manner, and an alacrity in assuring Emma that they would be delighted to come and see her. I do not say this of all, but of some.

And then one morning the crash came. I met our landlady on the stairs, looking excessively fierce and red in the face, and I subsequently discovered Emma encompassed with letters, bills, and books, and dissolved in floods of tears.

“She has just given me notice!” she cried, alluding to our landlady; “and in-

deed, Gwen, after I pay her for the week, how much money do you think I have left?" She burst into a wild, hysterical laugh, and pushed across the table towards me a silver sixpence and two coppers.

"What—what is this?" I stammered.

"It's eightpence. Can't you *see*? And it's all we have in the world!"

I remember that I turned it over mechanically, and giggled. I knew nothing of money matters. I had never had the spending of a sovereign in my life.

I was aware that Emma was extravagant, that she never could resist what she called "a bargain," never could keep money in her pocket. It was quite one of her favorite jokes to exclaim, "Bang goes another five-pound note!"

I had participated in this jest with smiling equanimity, and the supreme confi-

dence of youth : I believed that my step-mother, and only relative, had an ample supply of money somewhere. But—eightpence !

I stared at the two coppers and the little bit of silver in dismayed silence.

“ Take off your hat, Gwen,” continued Emma, impetuously, “ and listen to me. I’m not fit to be trusted with money—never was ; I *can’t* keep it. ‘ Sufficient unto the day,’ has always been my motto. You, I can see, are prudent ; you are good at figures, old beyond your years. I suppose you take after your mother’s people, for your father was nearly as—as—extravagant and heedless as myself. Now I’m going to lay my affairs before you—place everything in your hands, and let you manage all our money.”

“ Eightpence ! ” I repeated half under my breath.

“You know, we never saved a penny. I had a few hundreds of pounds from our auction, and I’ve spent that. A short life, and—a—a merry one!” looking at me with her pretty sapphire-colored eyes drowned in tears. “We have had a good time, have we not? And I was certain that the dear old Jam-Jam, who was *so* fond of your father—and, indeed, with every reason—would give us a handsome pension. But I have had a horrible letter by the mail just in. The Jam-Jam, who has been ailing for months—the new doctor did not understand his constitution—is dead. I am truly sorry.” A fresh burst of tears.

“Was all this grief for the Jam?” I asked myself, and stood confounded.

“My dear, we are paupers,” she sobbed. “Mr. Watkins, the agent, says that the new rajah, the nephew, a detestable creature,

who I know never could endure *me*, will only give a hundred and thirty pounds a year, and that has been wrung from him with the greatest difficulty. And then, as if this letter was not *enough*, here is one from the bank, to say my account is overdrawn, and I thought I had three hundred pounds there still ! I never, I knew, kept a proper account. Just drew checks, and never or seldom filled up the tiresome counterfoils, and now there is their hideous bank-book, all so neatly made up : ' Self, ten pounds ; Self, forty pounds ; Self, twenty pounds.' I can't think what has become of it ! I'm not used to keeping money, you see. I never bothered about putting down my expenses. Mrs. Keene brought me up these horrid letters, and came in too to ask about dinner, and I told her it was really shameful to charge two and sixpence for a cauliflower, and that we

really could not afford to pay her prices, and she was quite insolent. When I have paid her, we shall have just—this—this—eightpence——”

And she dashed it over nearer to me, and, leaning her head on her arms, went off in hysterics.

CHAPTER II.

RETROSPECTIVE.

IT would be a new experience for me to take the lead, to be manager, financier, adviser. When I had restored Emma, after some difficulty, and left her comparatively composed—and armed with salts and fan—I ran up to my own room, locked the door, and sat down to think. Something must be done immediately; we ought to leave our extravagantly expensive lodgings without even a week's delay. If Mrs. Keene would but let us off, it would save twelve guineas, and then we should have twelve pounds twelve shillings, to add to that ghastly eightpence. Mrs. Keene was

always very pleasant to me: I would muster up courage, and go and speak to her, and tell her that we had received unexpected news, and were obliged to retrench. I must honestly confess that my heart beat fearfully fast as I knocked at the door of her sanctum, and heard her shrill "come in."

The interview passed off much better than I anticipated—although the cauliflower still rankled in her mind. She, fortunately for us, had just heard of what she termed "a good let"—old customers, who wished to come in immediately, and she agreed to our prompt departure without demur, saying with immense condescension, "These sort of apartments are not suitable for any but wealthy folk, as can pay well, and is above fighting over vegetables!"

She, however, gave me some useful

hints as to where to look for cheaper and humbler quarters. I hurried round to Madame Ninette, and countermanded my new dress, and, after a hasty lunch, Emma and I set out in quest of apartments in keeping with our means. We searched on foot the whole of that warm June afternoon, and at last discovered two neat, cheap little rooms over a dairy in a street in Chelsea. We took them on the spot, and returned to pack our belongings. I packed everything; for Emma, between the emotions of the morning and the miles we had trudged in the sun, was completely exhausted, and I easily prevailed on her to sit on the sofa and rest.

Beguiled by an amusing magazine, and a box of Fuller's sweets—poor remnants of her little luxuries—she soon forgot all her sorrows, and to have seen her reclining there, looking so pretty in her cool

black tea-gown, and dainty little beaded shoes, no one would have believed she had a care in the world. What a child she was in some ways ! As for myself, I was not yet eighteen, but I had accepted such a leaden load of responsibility that I began to feel an old woman. The next morning our luggage, books, plants, and umbrellas were packed in and on a cab, and we started off for Carlyle Buildings, our future residence. As soon as we had rearranged our boxes, books, and plants, and given our meager orders—I was now housekeeper and purse-bearer—Emma sat down, as she expressed it, “to face the future resolutely.”

It was a great comfort that she owed no money, otherwise it was anything but a brilliant outlook. All that remained to her, when everything had been summed up, was her wardrobe, her jewelry, a small

pension, and a large circle of Indian friends.

We lived through the winter on the proceeds of a splendid diamond bracelet, and the hopes of getting some Indian children. Yes, Emma entertained the not uncommon idea of setting up a happy home for the children of her acquaintances. She was as sanguine as possible. Nothing ever damped her good faith in the future, and “a turn of luck.”

“I shall take a charming, sunny old place deep in the country, about twenty miles from London; keep a nice pony-carriage, cows, a donkey, French *bonnes*, and a governess, and charge two hundred a year. I shall easily collect a dozen children—twelve will be *ample* to begin with—and there, you see, is upwards of two thousand a year at once! The Blairs, and Joneses, and Smithsons, dear old

friends, will be only too thankful for the chance."

And, full of enthusiasm, she despatched many eager letters to the parents among her acquaintance ; but, strange to relate, not one of these correspondents availed herself of her kind proposals, though they wrote long, affectionate epistles, suggesting the offspring of *other* people ! Perhaps they were afraid that pretty little Mrs. Hayes, ever impulsive, extravagant, and gay, was too lively and erratic to take charge of their delicate darlings—besides, she was poor.

Oh, that was a dreary winter, when we existed on hope deferred ! Emma was delicate—she had a troublesome cough ; she required dainties, flowers, books, amusements, variety. Her gay spirits were fitful ; she was not often on the top of the wave now, but liable to terrible fits

of weeping and depression. She wept for many things I could not obtain for her. For instance, for India—for the sun (the sun in London in January !), for her old servants her old friends—where were they? Those abroad sent long, affectionate letters, occasional newspapers, and little presents ; those at home—well, at the moment there were none at home, none whose attachment would stand the strain of coming at least three miles to visit a shabby little widow, in very humble lodgings. I grew up that winter. I became ten years older. I learnt to market, to haggle, to housekeep, to concoct beef-tea and puddings, to make a little money go a long way. I learnt the cheap shops, the cheap little joints. I used to go out with our thrifty landlady to the Marlborough Road on Saturday nights, and bring home *such* bargains! I was thankful when the winter came to an end,

the days grew longer and lighter, and Emma recovered her health and her spirits. We partook of the season's delights in a very mild and inexpensive form ; we went per 'bus to some picture-galleries, to the shilling places at concerts, and occupied chairs in the Row. Emma liked to sit there the whole afternoon, returning home by what we called "our own green carriage" in time for our frugal tea.

"Oh, what a different life from what I have been accustomed to!" she complained to me one day. "Watching from my penny chair the crowds and crowds of happy people streaming by, and never seeing one familiar face! The scores of visitors your father and I put up in Jam-Jam-More—for races, picnics, dinners, shooting-parties, and I never see one of them. Do you think they are *all* out of town? or do they catch sight of me and flee?" and she

laughed—such a dreary little laugh. “Of course, I know that is nonsense, but it *does* seem so odd that I never come across any of what we used to call ‘the cold-weather folks,’ except indeed Captain Goring, and he gave me the cold shoulder—he barely raised his hat; and young Randford—you remember I met him in Piccadilly?—he did stop and speak to me, and said that he must try and come and call on me, and would look over his engagements and see what afternoon he could spare, and I never heard anything more about him. Would you believe it?—he spent three weeks with us in India, and welcome, and rode and drove our horses as if they were his own, and when he was leaving, he made *such* a fuss about his dearest, kindest, prettiest Mrs. Hayes!”

“That was India?” I ventured to suggest.

“Yes, India is one place—England another. I was a fool out there! If I had not kept open house—a sort of pleasant hotel, where there was *no* bill—for all these thankless, selfish wretches, I should be driving in my carriage now, and as for you, dear old Gwen——”

“Oh, I shall do very well,” I interrupted. “I wish you would not worry yourself about *me*.”

“We always intended you to come out, enjoy yourself, and make a nice match perhaps. And we did not spend as much as we might have done on your education; we thought it unnecessary, with the rupee at such ruinous exchange. We never dreamt that you would have to earn your own bread—oh, never—never!”

“Never mind me, dear!”

“But I *do* mind—it is my duty to

mind! Who would have thought that your father would not live to be a fine hale old man of eighty? He had a splendid constitution. Sometimes, when I used to be a little scared at our big bills, and suggested our trying to retrench, he always said, 'The old Jam-Jam will provide for us; he will give me a fine pension. He has promised me twelve hundred a year. It is only when one feels young and active that one *wants* money. When I begin to feel *anno domini*, we will go home and live very comfortably at Bath or Cheltenham.' And here have I come home all alone, and you and I have to struggle along on a hundred and thirty pounds a year—and—and my diamond ornaments."

I recollect that the poignant contrast between past and present so utterly overwhelmed poor Emma, that she could not

restrain her tears, and suddenly rising from her seat, and signing to me to accompany her, she departed with unusual precipitancy.

CHAPTER III.

A QUESTION OF TASTE.

IT was indeed a most lamentable truth that I was not as accomplished as most of the girls of my age. I could not paint or play the violin, I had no knowledge of the German language, I was ignorant of the agile art of skirt-dancing, and could not ride a horse—much less a bicycle. However, Emma found consolation in the fact that I “walked well, and carried myself with grace!”

“This was satisfactory,” I assured her with a laugh, “as I was never likely to have anything to carry *me*! As to walking, I was bound to be a foot-passenger all my days.”

I spoke French fluently, played the piano and guitar, was an excellent needle-woman ; but these would scarcely justify me in seeking a place above that of a cheap governess or waiting-maid. The struggle for existence was now so fierce, the half-million surplus women were such keen competitors for bread, that life was nothing more nor less than one long hardly contested battle. I had grasped this fact, young as I was. I was a good accountant (whilst Emma could not do the simplest little sum in addition) ; and, as purse-bearer, many a weary half-hour I sat up at night, working out our little budget, and striving to make both ends meet.

Yes, I was ostensibly the purse-bearer, and, if left a free hand, I could manage to balance our income ; but I was *not* independent. Emma was subject to wild lavish outbursts of her old Indian gen-

erosity ; she would overwhelm me with unexpected gifts—expensive gifts. I never knew when one of these awful surprises was in store for me—and also the accompanying bill.

I had long refrained from admiring anything in the shop windows. Nevertheless, I was endowed with a white chiffon parasol, an opera cloak, three pairs of scarlet silk stockings, an exquisite silk and lace petticoat—I who so sadly wanted everyday gloves and boots. I wanted them subsequently for a considerable period. Remonstrance only brought tears, and at last I came to the conclusion that such outbursts were ungovernable impulses of Emma's inborn, long-nurtured generosity ; that the disease was incurable, and these occasional attacks afforded her relief from an ever-pressing, maddening desire to lavish money !

My own mother had made a runaway match with my father, was sternly disowned by all her relatives, and cut off without even the proverbial shilling. She died when I was a month old, and I was subsequently sent to England. There I was received by two maiden ladies, "who took entire charge of children from India, their arrangements being those of a family, and not of a school"—*vide* the prospectus.

With these good people I spent ten very happy—I may add, luxurious—years. It was an establishment solely suited to the children of the wealthy, and my father discharged all expenses with liberal and punctual hand. He held an excellent appointment at the court of the native prince, and had married, eight years after my mother's death, pretty, penniless Miss Burke, who happened to be on a visit to friends in his neighborhood. Her enemies

declared that Miss Burke was an empty-headed, flighty little fool—vain, delicate, and wildly extravagant; and that my father—who really required some one to manage his affairs, and curb his expensive tastes—would have been far wiser had he selected instead one of the excellent Miss Primmers—the Reverend Jeremiah Primer's well-brought-up missionary daughters—and that such a match as he contemplated was madness, so far as improvidence and waste went—a mixture of oil and flame. Nevertheless, in spite of these prophets, who prophesied evil things, my father and his vivacious young Irish wife were excessively happy. They were both given to hospitality, were both easy-going and open-handed; they liked India, Indian ways, and Indian friends. He only returned once to England to see me, and she but rarely, to refurbish her

wardrobe—and pay me flying visits. Then she loaded me with gifts, treats, and caresses, and was so young, so pretty, and so merry, that she embodied my idea of a charming elder sister. I never, somehow, identified her as my stepmother—whom I mentally sketched as the old, wicked, long-nosed person pervading fairy tales. When I was fourteen, I was sent to an English school in Paris, and there I learnt to dance, to sing, and accompany myself on the guitar (it was such a nice portable instrument, suitable to India). It had been arranged that I was to join my people when I was eighteen, and already my outfit was under discussion, my escort for the passage sought for, when the news arrived of my father's sudden death. He had been killed by a fall from his horse, when out pigsticking, and Emma was returning home alone, a widow in straitened circum-

stances. No, they had never saved one single rupee ; their two pairs of hands had ever been open. They entertained lavishly ; she dressed magnificently ; he kept several race-horses, and their household expenses were enormous. For they had caught some of the infection from their surroundings, and the recklessness and display of the palace was reflected in their home. All things considered, Emma bore the change in her circumstances with surprising equanimity. She rarely complained. She was so easily amused and interested, so easily roused to animation ; but it made me sad to note her wandering eye, when we were abroad, always scanning the crowd, in intent search for some familiar face, some one she knew in old days.

And then her disappointments : the Sugdens, who scarcely deigned to bow to

her; the Woden-Spunners, who invited us to a crush, and left us totally unnoticed all the evening—and the cabs and our gloves alone had come to seventeen shillings. Poor Emma explained to me, with pitiful eloquence, that the Woden-Spunners had never been intimate friends. However Emma was soon to discover that every one was not like the Woden-Spunners.

One morning, we were shopping in the Army and Navy Stores—my father had always been a subscriber, and Emma clung to “the Stores” as if they embodied a faint, faint reflection of her more prosperous days. The various departments were crammed full, and I never remembered to have seen such a long double line of carriages in waiting, or such an assorted crowd of dogs in durance on the steps.

Our purchases were, needless to say,

moderate, and we carried them ourselves. They consisted on this occasion of a packet of candles, a packet of bloaters, an untrimmed straw hat, a pound of fresh butter, and two pounds of pressed beef.

It was extremely warm—a sultry July day—as we toiled up to the turnery department. At the corner of the stairs, a young man, who was flying down at breakneck speed, brushed against Emma ; he paused for a second to lift his hat and apologize, then exclaimed in quite another key—a key of cordial pleasure.

“ Why, it’s Mrs. Hayes, I declare ! Where did you drop from ? I am delighted to see you ! ”

As we were blocking up the landing, I moved on, and waited at the top of the stairs, leaving Emma and her newly discovered old friend—a friend who was sincerely glad to meet her—still conversing

with great animation. Yes, I could read it in his gestures, and the expression of his back. He was tall and square-shouldered, his long frock-coat and shining top-hat adding to his stature. So far I had not caught a glimpse of his face. Presently they turned and ascended together, still talking volubly. I believe that he imagined Emma to be alone, until she said, as she put her hand on my arm—

“This is my stepdaughter, Miss Hayes.”

He glanced at me politely, then his casual glance suddenly changed into a long scrutinizing gaze of astonishment—no, not of admiration, merely unqualified amazement.

He was a good-looking young man, with a somewhat thin, aristocratic face, brown hair, brown eyes, and a light, reddish-brown mustache.

“I used to know your father, Miss

Hayes. My people and I stayed with him in India, you know."

I did not know—how should I?

"He was awfully good to me, and took me out shooting and elephant-catching." Then, suddenly turning to Emma, he said, "What are you going to do now? It is one o'clock. Will you come and have lunch with me at the club, or will you lunch here?"

"Oh, here, thank you, since we are on the spot; and I am told that the curries are celebrated."

"All right, then, we will try the curry. Allow me to relieve you of your parcels."

In another second, and despite our vehement expostulations, this smart young man was actually carrying our beef, butter, and candles, and leading the way to the refreshment department. Five minutes later, we were seated at a little table, and

Emma, with her gloves off and menu in hand, was, by our host's desire, ordering our lunch. No, after all, it was much too hot for curry; it was a day for mayonnaise and aspic jelly. He seemed most anxious to please my stepmother, and to make much of her. Poor Emma! she was unused to such attentions; they brought a brilliant color to her cheek, and a sparkle to her eyes. She brightened up wonderfully under their influence.

Warm as the room was, I found myself rather "out in the cold." These two had so many subjects in common, so many topics which were closed to me. They talked of places and people I had never seen, of the great camp at Attock, of the rajah's big shoot, and finally of that young man's own relations.

"So you have not seen my mother since

she stayed with you at Jam-Jam-More? She and my father are abroad now, and I am off to South America in three days. I've been buying my kit here. Done a tremendous morning's work. I'm combining business and pleasure. My father has considerable investments out there which he wants me to look after—then I'm going to the West Indies."

"It seems to me you are never at home," said Emma.

"No one ever is at home now. Home is the last place in which to look for people in these days. A great rage for rambling has seized old and young. We migrate to the South of Europe for the winter, show ourselves in town for a few weeks in the spring, and then start off again. I think the old people are far the worst—they set the example. I tell my mother she is like the wandering Jew."

“Does Lady Hildegarde never come to town?”

“No, not the last two years.” Then, looking over at me; “Did *you* have a good time this season, Miss Hayes?”

“A good time!” repeated Emma. “Why, the poor child has never been anywhere. You forget——”

“Yes—yes, of course; you could not take her. I wish my mother had been in London,” he continued genially. “She would have been delighted to have chaperoned her to no end of smart functions, and presented Miss Hayes at a drawing-room.”

It was quite clear that this young man did not realize the fatal change in our circumstances.

“She has never been anywhere,” continued Emma—“never been to a dance, or a race-meeting——”

“There is Sandown to-morrow. I’m a member; will you come with me? I can take two ladies. It ought to be a capital day: Eclipse Stakes, you know. I’ll meet you at Waterloo——”

“No, no, no,” interrupted Emma. “I would not go, and, of course, Gwen——”

She hesitated. No, certainly, I could not accompany this nameless young man alone.

“Well, look here,” he said impetuously. “Let us do *something* to-morrow. This is Tuesday, and I’m off on Saturday morning, and shall not be in England again for ages. Have you any engagement?”

“No—none.” The very idea made her smile.

“Then what would you like to do? Would you care to go up the river? Start from Paddington about ten, go to Maidenhead, get a good boat, and lunch in the

Cliveden Woods, or up some nice cool backwater, row down to Taplow, have tea at the inn, come back to town in time to dine and do the theater. How would that be?"

"Oh, Mr. Somers, you take away my breath! The expedition up the river would be as much as we can manage, and delightful, would it not, Gwen?" appealing to me.

"Yes," I assented. "Delightful indeed, if it won't be too much for *you*?"

"Not at all, my old-head-on-young-shoulders. She"—to our host—"takes such care of me, and manages all our affairs: she might be *my* mother! We will accept the river part of the program."

"Then that is quite settled. I meet you to-morrow at ten o'clock sharp at Paddington?"

The room was now crammed, and I

noticed that our companion had a bowing or nodding acquaintance with many customers.

“Your sister is married?” observed Emma. “I saw it in the papers. You are not married, are you?”

“Perish the thought! I am——”

“Oh, Everard!” cried a clear, high-bred voice, and a tall, fair, supercilious-looking girl halted at our table. “Fancy seeing *you* here, lunching in the Army and Navy Stores among your parcels,” glancing at our belongings. “How *very* domestic!”

“I have just met an old Indian friend,” he explained, rather consciously. “And we are having tiffin together, as you see.”

“Oh, I see,” staring straight at *me*, with a look of arrogant inquiry, which made me color warmly: well, yes, call it blushing. Why should I blush? I had

never met this man till half an hour ago, and here was this ultra-smart young woman in a French bonnet standing over me, her pale blue eyes distinctly telling me that I was a designing adventuress.

“Mrs. Hayes,” he said, “this is my sister, Lady Polexfen.” Emma bowed, and Lady Polexfen lowered her eyelashes. “I was just speaking of you, Maudie,” he added. “Talk of an angel, you know. We stayed with Mrs. Hayes in India. It was at her house my mother was so ill.”

“Indeed!” indifferently, now turning her bracelet to consult her watch.

“Mind you turn up in good time to-morrow. We are going down to Sandown on the coach. Dolly Chalgrove is coming.” She paused for a second, as if to allow sufficient time for this impressive piece of news to soak thoroughly into his mind.

“And, remember, if you keep us waiting, as you often do, you will discover that I am anything but an angel!”

“I won’t keep you waiting,” responded her brother, serenely, “for the excellent reason that I’m not going to Sandown! I’m going up the river instead.”

“And breaking your other engagements?” she asked sharply.

“I can’t see that at all. It was left an open question.”

“*Was* it!” she exclaimed, in a still sharper key. And again she looked over at me with a gleam in her eye, and I could see that, cool as she tried to appear, she was furiously angry; indeed, her voice trembled a little as she added, “Well, of course, it is merely a question of taste!”

And this was her last word—her parting shot. With an overwhelmingly haughty bow—to be distributed amongst us—Lady

Polexfen swept away, and joined two gentlemen and a lady, who had been interested spectators of the recent slight passage at arms. Speaking for myself, I felt decidedly uncomfortable, and it was some seconds before I ventured to look at our host. Yes, undoubtedly he had reddened a little (whether with anger or shame I could not guess), and was carefully filling Emma's wine-glass.

"How *very* pretty your sister is!" she ventured with great magnanimity, endeavoring to take the rough edge off our thoughts. "I never saw a more delicate profile! She is a little like Lady Hildgarde."

"Yes, she resembles my mother a good deal in many ways, and, being her only daughter, she has been a bit spoiled—always wants her own way, as you may see."

"And now, Mr. Somers," continued

Emma, "you will not make a stranger of *me*, nor allow me to accept any little arrangements your sister has made. You must postpone our trip. You know you can take us up the river *any* time!"

But to this suggestion he would not listen, and displayed a will fully as robust as his relative's. In fact, he became almost angry at last, and Emma was compelled to succumb.

We accordingly spent a delightful, never-to-be-forgotten afternoon on the river, rowed here and there, as fancy dictated, by two stalwart boatmen. Mr. Somers, in a sailor hat and flannels, occasionally took an oar himself, and even gave me a lesson. A dainty luncheon had been provided, which we discussed under cool green branches, up a deliciously sequestered backwater; then followed the row down to Taplow, and our tea at

the inn : in fact, every item of the program was conscientiously carried out ; and during that long summer's day, in the intimacy of picnicking and boating, Mr. Somers and I made extraordinary strides in advancing our acquaintance.

We parted reluctantly at Paddington Station, full of plans for the morrow. We were to lunch with Mr. Somers again, and accompany him to a very private view of most lovely Indian paintings. Emma struggled hard against this second encroachment on his time, and struggled as vainly as any kid in the folds of a boa constrictor !

“ Of course,” he said, half playfully, “ if she had something better on hand, and was already tired of his society——”

And what could she answer ? She could only murmur deprecating ejaculations of dissent, assent, and gratitude.

As we drove home in a hansom (a rare extravagance), exchanging voluble raptures, an obtrusive chill little idea suddenly got in and sat down between us.

What were we to wear? A serge skirt and a shirt had done very well for the river; but for a smart luncheon at a smart club, for an exclusive gathering at a private view, where possibly all the gowns would be carefully noted down and described in the papers, our now rusty black dresses would be, oh, so sadly out of place!

“It does not matter so much about me, dear,” said Emma, “but you. I am so sorry now that your best *crépon* came in for that shocking wetting last Sunday. Oh, *why* did I not take a cab?” she exclaimed regretfully. “And your poor hat received its death-blow. *This* is no climate for ostrich feathers—not like India, where you can wear your best

frocks and hats for months without one moment's anxiety, and when the rains do come it is not before they have given at least a week's notice ! ”

“ And that drenching shower, not giving one second—beyond half a dozen immense drops, and after that the deluge ! However, I can curl the feathers up, press out my skirt, and, with a new pair of gloves, perhaps I can manage to pass in a crowd ! ”

Really, we did not present at all such a bad appearance as we emerged from our lodgings next morning, nor did we feel beneath the occasion, at our very pleasant and *recherché* lunch. It was only when we got among the present season's new dresses, and stood side by side with the latest and most costly fashions, that our poor black feathers looked a little battered and draggled !

I saw it myself, but Mr. Somers did *not*. No, no, all his attention was occupied in entertaining us—in showing us the best pictures, the most popular or unpopular celebrities, the beauties, the political stars, and the leaders of fashion. Among these I noted, without his assistance, his own sister, Lady Polexfen. She was dressed in a large white hat, and filmy summer gown, this warm July day, and was sauntering around, attended by a military man, occasionally scanning people or pictures, with a long-handled eyeglass. After a time, *we* came into its range!

I turned away hastily, for I had no desire to encounter her ladyship, and affected to be absorbed in a beautiful sketch of sunrise on the Jumna, and the Taj! This was a much-admired gem, and the crowd gathered closely around it.

I hoped that Lady Polexfen had already

passed by. Then I heard her voice say, close behind me, "My dear Everard!" Then, in fluent French, "What on earth *are* you doing here, dragging about these shabby, second-rate women? Have you lost your senses? And you know this is a place where *every* one sees every one."

"So it seems!" he answered, in equally fluent French, "but there is no occasion for you to see *me*. These shabby people, as you call them, are not second-rate, but first-rate."

"The Marchioness of Kinsale pointed you out to me, and laughed. She was so amused at my eccentric brother."

"Horrid, painted old harridan!" he answered, now roused to aggression. "I would not be seen speaking to her, if I were you; but, then, *you* are not particular, as long as a woman has a handle to her name and a bran-new gown to

her back! Now, *I* prefer the society of *ladies*."

"Oh, very well, *very* well," in a choked voice. "Pray, pray go your own way, and you'll see where it lands you. Only, don't come to me for advice and assistance!" And here, as Emma turned and asked me for the catalogue, our neighborhood was, perhaps, suspected, for Lady Pollexfen's remonstrances ceased, and presently I saw her large picture-hat slowly passing through a doorway into another room.

As Emma had not caught sight of her, I kept this delightful experience entirely to myself. It certainly rather threw a cloud over the pleasure of my day—a cloud which, I must confess, Mr. Somers—so cheery, so courteous, so chivalrous, so determined to treat us as great ladies—did much to dispel.

As we took leave of him, and thanked him warmly for all the pleasure he had given us, he looked hard at me from under the brim of his tall hat, and said—

“The pleasure has been conferred by Mrs. and Miss Hayes, and I trust that this will not be the last day by many that we shall spend together.”

Next morning brought a messenger with a note from Mr. Somers, and a quantity of lovely flowers. Of course, I read this note, which was written in a bold, black, determined sort of hand; it said—

“DEAR MRS. HAYES,

“I hope you are none the worse for yesterday’s excursion. I send you a few flowers. I remember how fond you were of them and your wonderful garden at Jam-Jam-More. I have ventured to tell my florist to supply you constantly. I am

very busy getting under weigh. I start the first thing to morrow. Kind regards to Miss Hayes and yourself.

“ Yours sincerely,

“ E. SOMERS.

“ P.S.—I find I have some of the books you mentioned that you would like to read, and am sending them round to you.”

The books (a huge parcel of the newest publications) duly arrived ; most of them had never been cut ! I'm afraid Mr. Somers stretched a point when he said he *had* them. Choice flowers recalled him to our minds three times a week, and it did not need the fragrant roses, carnations, and lilies to remind Emma of one Indian guest who had not forgotten her.

The autumn went by without any incident, save that Emma's strength and

spirits flagged. The memory of that day on the river had visited her for weeks ; but what is one happy day out of three hundred and sixty-five—one swallow in a summer?

We were now at Stonebrook on her account. Her doctor had forbidden her to spend the winter season in town, and ordered her to Sussex ; and although (as I have hinted) our locality and abode were not particularly exhilarating, still, I was by no means sorry to get away from London.

CHAPTER IV.

LADY HILDEGARDE'S PHOTOGRAPH.

AFTER waiting twenty minutes in semi-darkness (poor people must exercise patience), the lamp—welcome herald of tea—was carried in by Mrs. Gabb, whose expressive countenance distinctly warned off either questions or expostulations. She proceeded to dash down the blinds, bang the shutters, coal-scuttle, fire-irons, and finally the door.

By lamplight our little apartment did not look nearly so mean and shabby as by day. Emma had marvelous taste in an airy, sketchy style—a taste which, she assured me, was common to many Anglo-

Indian ladies, who were frequently compelled to make a very little furniture go a long way, and who were unsurpassed in the art of makeshifts. Some grasses and winter berries filled several bowls and vases ; a few pretty Eastern ornaments were scattered about ; an Indian drapery was thrown carelessly over the sofa. A smart paper lamp-shade and two or three silk cushions brightened up the room, and last, not least, a considerable gallery of photographs. They caught the eye on all sides, and had a truly imposing effect. Emma had been twelve years in the East, and had accumulated many portraits. Here was a smart cavalry man—an A.D.C. ; there an imposing general officer covered with orders ; a Ghoorka, a hill beauty, a polo pony, an Indian picnic, a wedding group, a lady in a rickshaw, holding over herself a coquettish Japanese um-

brella. They made indeed a goodly show, and as Emma remarked, "putting sentiment altogether on one side, were easily carried about, and went a long way towards furnishing a shabby sitting-room." Whilst the tea was drawing, I tidied up, swept the hearth, straightened the lampshade, collected and put away straggling books and papers. Meanwhile, Emma drew forth a pack of somewhat *passée* cards, cleared a space on the table, and proceeded to deal them out in four neat rows.

"I am going to do your fortune," she announced. "This is your birthday. I wish it had not come on a Friday; however, let me see. Oh, dear, dear, dear! *All* the bad cards are settling round you. Tears, a disappointment! there is sickness, you see; a journey, a dark man, and a dark woman; she is antipathetic to you,

and will injure you. Yes. Look, I have counted again ; she comes right between you and the marriage card ! You will get your wish."

" But I have not thought of any wish."

" Ah ! and I see money ; but here is this horrible ace of spades—the death card."

At this instant we heard a strange voice, and a sound of scuffling steps in the passage.

" Some one is coming ! " I had barely uttered the warning, and Emma had only time to throw a newspaper over the pack, when Mrs. Gabb, flinging open the door, shrilly announced, " Miss Skuce."

Whereupon a tall elderly lady, in a long damp waterproof, bounced into the room, showing every one of her front teeth.

" Pray excuse my calling at this late hour," she said, shaking hands with us effusively. " At least, it is not really late,

only half-past four, quite visiting time *still*; but it is so dark, it might be the middle of the night."

To which statement we politely assented, and also further conceded "that it had been a shockingly wet day."

"And how do you like dear little Stonebrook?" she asked. "If you'll allow me, I'll just take off my cloak."

"Oh, it is not very lively," replied Emma; "but then, I came here for my health."

"Ah, indeed," rising to hang her waterproof carefully over a chair, and taking a seat nearer to Emma whom she stared at exhaustively.

Emma, though thin and fragile, was still a pretty woman. She wore a handsome black satin and lace tea-gown (a remnant of better days); diamonds (of ditto) sparkled on her wasted hands, and

her expressive eyes were lit up with vivacity. Even this unexpected visit from a garrulous old maid made quite an agreeable break in the otherwise dreary wet day.

"How long shall you stay, do you think?"

"I really have not formed any plans—possibly all the winter."

"And Miss——," looking at me interrogatively. "*Surely* not your daughter?"

"No, my stepdaughter—Miss Hayes."

"It's a terrible dull place for young people, especially if they are accustomed to India," smiling at me blandly.

"I have never been in India since I was two months old," I replied with precipitation.

"But *you* were?" she observed, turning to Emma. "And army—of course?" in a confidential key.

"No. My husband had an appoint-

ment at the court of the Rajah of Jam-Jam-More. He was his medical adviser."

"Ah, I understand"—in a patronizing key—"a native doctor!"

"Oh no!" bursting into a merry laugh; "doctor to a native prince."

"Dear me! Is it not the same thing? How nice this room looks! Your own pretty things, I am *sure*. What quantities of charming photographs! May I peep at them?"—rising with a sprightly air.

"Oh, certainly, with pleasure. But they are chiefly Indian friends—and I doubt if you will find them interesting."

"I am *always* interested in other people's friends. But what do I behold?"—striking an attitude—"a bunch of peacock's feathers! So unlucky! Why do you keep them, dear Mrs. Hayes?"

“ They belong to Mrs. Gabb—not to me—you must ask her.”

“ And you are not superstitious? Table-turning, palmistry, second sight, planchette : do you believe in any of those ? ”

“ I don't think I have much faith in any of them—no, not even planchette—though I heard a horrible story of a planchette who aggravated inquirers by writing such horrible things, that one man, in a rage, pitched it into the fire when it immediately gave a diabolical scream, and flew up the chimney.”

At this little anecdote I broke into a loud laugh—I invariably did so.

“ Of course, *that* was arrant nonsense ! ” remarked Miss Skuce, carefully replacing the peacock's feathers, and recommencing a tour of inspection.

I watched her attentively, with her pointed nose, near-sighted eyes, looped-

up skirts, with a rim of chalky mud, and square-toed laced boots—shaped like pie-dishes—as she made a deliberate examination of Emma's little gallery, throwing us remarks over her shoulder from time to time.

“ I always make a point of calling on new people—strangers,” she announced from over the edge of a large durbar group. “ They must find it so desperately dull, and I'm an old resident. My brother is a doctor. Most of the neighbors don't visit ; they draw the line at the hotel, and never notice people in lodgings, since that awful scandal at Mrs. Tait's, three years ago. I cannot—ahem—repeat the story, just *now*,” and she looked at me expressively ; “ but I will tell you all about it another time. I dare say the rectory people *may* come. At any rate ”—casting an appreciative glance at Emma's unex-

pectedly elegant appearance—"I shall make a point of mentioning you to them."

"Oh, thank you very much, but we are only here for a change," protested Emma; "the doctors said I must have dry bracing air, and——"

"What have I got here?" interrupted our visitor, who had been routing on the chimney-piece, behind a fire-screen. "A *large* photograph of dear Lady Hildegarde Somers!" holding it in both hands as if it were some holy relic. "How *did* you come by it?" she demanded, in an impressive key.

"She gave it to me, of course," was Emma's simple reply.

Miss Skuce's little eyes widened as she stood on the rug, clasping her treasure-trove, and contemplating Emma with an air of tragic interrogation.

"Then you *know* her?" she gasped out at last.

"Intimately. At least, she stayed in our house in India for six weeks, so I suppose I may say that I know her rather well."

Miss Skuce was now compelled to seek a seat, and signed to my stepmother to continue.

"My husband and I had numbers of visitors in the cold weather; they came to see the Jam-Jam, and the old tombs and temples, and we put them up in our house, and got them shooting and sport."

"What kind of sport?" questioned her listener.

"Sometimes tiger-shooting, sometimes hunting with cheetahs, sometimes elephant-catching or pigsticking."

"Oh!" ejaculated Miss Skuce, who was visibly impressed.

"You see, my husband had a capital

appointment, though he *was* uncovenanted. He drew large pay, and was supplied, besides, with carriages and horses, a house and servants."

"How *very* nice! And about her ladyship?"

"Oh, Lady Hildegarde and Mr. Somers and their son came to us for ten days, but she unfortunately got a touch of the sun, and was laid up for weeks. My husband attended her, I nursed her, and we did all we possibly could for her. She was a charming patient, and *so* grateful. Mr. Somers and his son went on to the frontier, and left her with us during her convalescence. She joined them in Bombay. I have never seen her since I came to England."

"Really. How strange!"

"But I met her son in London last summer. Such a handsome, unaffected

young fellow (my poor husband took a great fancy to him). He was just on the eve of starting off to America, but he managed to give us two delightful days—one of them on the river—and was altogether most kind. He told me that his father and mother were abroad. I have quite lost sight of the whole family now. I don't even know where they live when they *are* at home. I have lost sight of so many people," added Emma, with a regretful sigh.

"Not know where the Somers live!" repeated Miss Skuce. "Why, my dear Mrs. Hayes, they live within three miles of where you are sitting!—at Coppingham Abbey, the show place of this part of the world. The Somers of Coppingham are not rich—as riches are understood now—and I am afraid poor dear old Mr. Somers has lost a great deal of money over

mines in South America, and stocks—he was never a business man ; but the family are as old as the hills. Miss Somers made a splendid match last year, she married Lord Polexfen ; certainly he is rather ancient for *her*, but then you cannot have everything. Maudie is very handsome, but frightfully ambitious, worldly, haughty ; quite, *quite* between ourselves—I never took to Maudie.”

I heartily but secretly applauded this sentiment.

“ Of course, it was not a love-affair—respect on one side, admiration on the other—and, as I have told you, Maudie could not expect everything, and—and she thought——”

“ That an old lord was better than none at all,” I supplemented briskly.

“ Oh, I would not say *that*, by any means,” returned Miss Skuce, rather

stiffly. (It was evident that no one else was to be permitted to censure this august young woman.) "The family are frequently abroad now, but are always here in December and January. And so, you tell me, you know dear Lady Hildegarde intimately?"

And she paused and surveyed Emma with her head on one side. It was abundantly demonstrated by our visitor's face and gestures that, from being strangers in the land—mere wandering, homeless nobodies—we had been suddenly promoted to the footing of people of distinction, the intimate friends of the mistress of the show place of the county. The alteration in Miss Skuce's manner was as amusing as it was abrupt—from an air of easy patronage to an attitude of humble and admiring deference—the transition was absolutely pantomimic.

“Dear Lady Hildegarde is the moving spirit of the whole neighborhood,” she remarked. “She is *so* active, her ideas are so full of originality, her energy is marvelous ; no one would believe that she has a married daughter, and a son of seven-and-twenty. And she is so fond of having young people about her. I am certain that she will be immensely taken with this pretty child,” indicating me with a wave of the photograph in her hand. “She will introduce her to all the best people ; she will have her stay at the Abbey, and give a ball for her, of that I feel confident.”

“Oh no, no ! Absurd ! Nonsense !” protested Emma, with a beaming smile. But, unless I was much mistaken, the long seven-leagued boots of Emma’s imagination had carried her far ahead of Miss Skuce’s gratifying predictions. An agreeable idea once planted in her mind, im-

mediately struck root, grew, and flourished, like Jack's immortal beanstalk.

"*How* I wish you had let me know that you were a friend of Lady Hildegarde's," continued Miss Skuce, effusively, "instead of remaining, if I may say so, so foolishly *incog*. The Bennys of the Dovecote, and the Prouts, will be overwhelmed to think that they have not called. Her ladyship will say we have *all* neglected you! I hope the people here are satisfactory? Mrs. Gabb has rather a tongue, but she is very clean. Are you comfortable, dear Mrs. Hayes?"

"Yes, thank you; I might be worse."

"I must send you some fresh eggs. How are you off for literature?"

"In a starving condition. I've not seen a new book for months."

"Oh, then we will *all* supply you! I notice that you take the *Sussex Figaro*,"

lifting the paper with a sudden swoop, and thereby discovering the neatly arranged rows of playing cards!

It would be difficult to say which of the two ladies looked the more taken aback and out of countenance. Miss Skuce stood for a second with her mouth half open, paper in hand. Emma became scarlet, as she hastily scrambled the cards together.

"So you play patience, I see," said our visitor, after a pause, and with really admirable presence of mind.

"Oh, anything, everything, from *ecarté* to—to old maid, pour passer le temps. I hope you will have some tea. Gwen, what *have* we been thinking about? Come along and pour it out."

In ten minutes' time, Miss Skuce had nearly emptied her third cup, and, enlivened by the fragrant herb, had become

most talkative and confidential, and developed a truly warm interest in us and our concerns.

Emma was advised whom she was to know, and whom she must *not* know on any account; where she was to deal, whose fly she was to hire for parties—all was laid before her in detail. A stranger entering the room would naturally have supposed that this eager lady, who was nursing her empty teacup, was an old and intimate friend.

Finally, with lavish promises of eggs, books, and flowers, Miss Skuce, as she expressed it, "tore herself away." She must have managed to whisper a few words on the stairs or in the passage, for when Mrs. Gabb came to remove the things, she wore an unusually benign aspect; there was no angry banging and clanging of unoffending and inanimate

articles. On the contrary, she poked the fire with an extravagant hand, drew the curtains noiselessly, and remarked in a surprisingly affable tone that "she had made us a nice little batter pudding," and "that it was a wet night."

So much for numbering a large photograph of a local magnate among our household gods! If her mere portrait had wrought such an agreeable transformation in visitor and landlady, what might we not expect from the presence of Lady Hildegarde herself?

CHAPTER V.

WE GET INTO SOCIETY.

EMMA'S bedroom was immediately beneath mine, and during the night I heard her coughing repeatedly, a nasty little short hacking cough. I went to her early in the morning, in order to condole with her and urge her to remain in bed ; but she was already dressed.

"Kept me awake, my cough, you say? Yes, but I did not mind," was her extraordinary statement. "I did not want to sleep, I had so much to think about—so many pleasant thoughts."

"I know what you have been thinking about," I said, as we sat down to break-

fast—" or, rather, of whom you have been thinking—of Lady Hildegarde."

"Of course—why not? I have not seen her for four years and more—nearly five—but she is not the sort of person who would *ever* change; and really, I hope you won't think it very mean of me to say it, but she is under obligations to me, and I am not too proud to allow her to repay me. I nursed her for weeks, and we gave her the best nourishment, medical attendance, champagne, ice, all gratis, the rajah's own saloon carriage to the junction, and, when she said good-by, she seemed really *quite* affected, and gave me two large photographs of herself, and kissed me over and over, and said, 'I cannot find words to express all I *feel*, but I shall never, never, never forget you—my own sister would not have done more! You have saved my life, and you will, I hope, find some day

that I am a woman of deeds—not words!’ And now, here is her opportunity. What a piece of luck our coming here! Just by chance! We knew no one in London, and I was too ill latterly to take you about; here Lady Hildegarde will be your sponsor in society and introduce you everywhere. Her own daughter is married, and she is very fond of going out and chaperoning girls—she told me so. I must see about your dresses, my dear. I have a lovely white satin that I only wore once, and that will alter quite easily for you!”

Emma was radiant. Positively she looked ten years younger than she had done yesterday. Ah! hope, delusive hope, how many flattering tales had you not told her! One drop of this elixir of life seemed to intoxicate her. Give her, figuratively, a stick, or a pebble, and straw,—

what grand castles she created and peopled. Sometimes, as we sat over the fire together, her eloquent tongue and facile imagination drew forecasts and anticipations so brilliant and so vivid that I could compare them to nothing but fairy stories, or the Arabian Nights Entertainments.

After breakfast, when I was out doing our insignificant marketing, I noticed Miss Skuce at a distance, with both hands uplifted, her chin wagging vigorously, holding forth at great and uninterrupted length to two ladies, who seemed interested. I also caught sight of her at our mutual grocer's—she was purchasing eggs, which she carried off, packed in sawdust, in a paper bag. Surely—surely—However, time would tell (time *does* tell on eggs.)

That afternoon, by three o'clock, our little room was full of visitors—we were

positively short of chairs! Miss Skuce was the first arrival—carrying in her hand a present in a basket (it contained eggs and flowers.) The Misses Benny, extremely exclusive spinsters from the Dovecote, appeared bearing their mama's card and excuses—prim, long-nosed women, wearing severe tailor-made dresses, prim felt hats with one wing, and attired alike even to their gold bangles and brown kid gloves.

“We heard from Miss Skuce that you are a great friend of Lady Hildegarde's,” said the elder of the sisters, addressing Emma in a high-pitched, shrill voice. “Indeed, I see her over there on the chimney-piece! You knew her in India, did you not?”

“Yes,” assented Emma. “I knew her very well.”

“I dare say you will see a great deal of

her. She adores India, and brought home such lovely curios — embroidery, rugs, ivory work, and such a *sweet* little silver teapot the shape of an elephant.”

“Yes, I remember it—my husband gave it to her,” returned Emma, eagerly.

“Ah, you don’t *say* so! I hope we shall see you on Thursday. We want you to come over to tea at the Dovecote, just outside the town, at four o’clock. We hope to have a few people and a little music. Your daughter sings, I believe?”

“Thank you, we shall be very happy.”

“I suppose you have not made many acquaintances here, as yet?”

“No; no one has called but Miss Skuce.”

“Oh,” smiling, “*she* calls on every one—so like her! She finds out all about strangers, and she is nicknamed the ‘Stonebrook News.’ She is a well-mean-

ing person, but dreadfully pushing—you must really keep her in her place. Lady Hildegarde puts her down so beautifully.”

“But I understand that Lady Hildegarde is a particular friend of hers?”

“Of *hers*!—of Miss Skuce’s!” in a loud voice. “Oh, dear me, what *has* she been telling you? She is never invited to the Abbey, except once a year to the dignity ball here—and Lady Hildegarde merely makes *use* of her at bazaars and charity teas.”

The departing Bennys met in the narrow doorway Lady Bloss and Miss Bloss, the former a commanding matron in black velvet, with a miniature catafalque upon her stately head—aquiline, portly, immensely condescending, with a very large person and a small squeaky voice.

“So pleased to find you at home,” offering two fat fingers, and looking round anx-

iously for a *solid* seat. "My daughter, Miss Bloss. I heard you were a very intimate friend of my dear cousin, Lady Hildegarde Somers. Some one happened to mention it when I was in the post-office, so I thought, as I was in town, I would just run over and see you!"

The idea of Lady Bloss running anywhere was too preposterous to entertain without smiles.

"And how do you like our little town? And were you long in India?"—and so on and so on. "And will you come to tea next week? I'll send you a card." And then she struggled up from her low seat, beckoned to her daughter, and really the room looked quite empty after their departure!

Little Mrs. Cholmondeley, the wife of a M. F. H., was still with us—a smart, fashionable-looking woman, with sandy hair

and a long-handled eye-glass, by means of which she noted everything.

"Lady Bloss is quite *too* amusing," she remarked, after she had sped that lady most affectionately, and asked her *why* she had not been to see her for such ages? "She is no more cousin to Lady Hildegarde than to the man in the moon ; her husband was an old Indian judge, a K. C. B. She and Lady Hildegarde have the same dressmaker, and that is positively the only connection."

"Oh yes, excuse me," said her friend ; "Lady Bloss's uncle married a cousin of Lady Hildegarde's aunt by marriage."

"Oh, spare my poor stupid head!" cried Mrs. Cholmondeley. "I call that a conundrum, not a connection ; don't you, Mrs. Hayes?"

Emma smiled sympathetically ; she hated riddles.

“ I am sure the politics and parties of our Little Pedlington will amuse a woman of the world like you. Do you care for driving? ”

Emma admitted that she liked it—in fine weather.

“ Then I shall come some afternoon early and take you out. Will Monday suit you, at two o'clock? ”

“ Thank you, it is very kind of you.”

“ And your daughter, too; there will be plenty of room. I hope two o'clock is not interfering with your dinner hour? ”

Emma reddened, as she replied with some dignity—

“ Oh no, thank you; we always dine late.”

Yes, we called it dinner. When our last visitor had driven away, Emma turned to me and said—

“ My stupid brain is in a whirl. I can

compare this afternoon to nothing less than a reception at Government House. I feel loaded to the earth with attention. I am to have drives, books, magazines, and even game and cough lozenges! What a funny world it is! A week ago—what am I saying? two days ago—these people stared over our heads, and looked at us as if we might give them smallpox; and behold all this change—this sudden thaw, all because I happen to know Lady Hildegarde. What did you think of them, dear—you know, you have a very critical mind?”

“ Well, since you ask me, I think that there seems to be a sliding-scale of merit. Mrs. Benny looks down on Miss Skuce; Lady Bloss sniffs at the Bennys; Mrs. Cholmondeley despises Lady Bloss; and no doubt, some one else turns up her nose at her.”

“ Lady Bloss’s dignity was something overpowering. She entirely shrank from India and Indian topics, and yet she is a regular old Burra mem Sahib, now I come to think of it. How I wish I had known! —I might have talked to her in Hindostani. I dare say she would have had a fit! ”

“ I think it is most likely either that, or she would have called the police.”

“ Well, I must ask about a dressmaker immediately, and get your dresses ready,” continued Emma, “ for I can see that you are going to be overwhelmed with invitations. Lady Hildegarde will, of course, charperon you everywhere ; and I should like you to do her *credit* ! ”

CHAPTER VI.

A VISIT OF SEVEN MINUTES.

EMMA'S prophecy came true for once—in fact, as far as I know, it was the solitary occasion on which her vivid day-dreams were realized. We were overwhelmed with civilities and invitations (chiefly to tea). Every day brought flowers and books, and it was quite a common occurrence to see a carriage and pair waiting at our modest entrance. Mrs. Cholmondeley proved to be as good as her word, and took us for several drives. We were shown “The Abbey,” as people called it—a low-lying, venerable, gray structure, with fine old trees and wonderful cloisters.

We went to tea at the rectory, to lunch with Lady Bloss, and to quite a smart musical evening party at the Dovecote. The curate called, also Dr. Skuce, and—oh! great event!—Sir Warren Hastings Bloss! He came to “talk over India.” He announced his errand quite frankly to Emma, and he actually remained an hour and a half. Never had Mrs. Gabb ushered so many gentry up and down her narrow stairs—no, not in the twenty years she had let lodgings; and her manner was now as unpleasantly obsequious as it had formerly been otherwise.

A cup of her own tea was a pleasant little attention which she carried to us before rising, and she had become quite liberal in the matter of candles and clean tablecloths. Even indirectly, we were beholden to Lady Hildegarde for many

bounties. “*She* was expected at the end of the week,” so Miss Skuce informed us, and I am confident that the entire community were on the *qui-vive* to see on what terms the great lady would be with the reduced gentlewomen at Mrs. Gabb’s in the High Street! I believe they anticipated boundless intimacy, measuring its dimensions by the size of the photograph in Emma’s possession. No one in the whole country had been endowed with a promenade copy in full court dress. If Lady Hildegarde’s esteem was to be measured by the size of her picture, Emma, my stepmother, stood second to none in her regard. Of course, every one knew that we were poor. I am certain that Mrs. Gabb, in exchanging confidences in the hall with Miss Skuce, had informed her that we got in coals by the sack, and dined on two chops and a rice pudding. I am

equally positive that Miss Skuce was furiously jealous of our other acquaintances. Were we not her own special discovery? The nearer the advent of Lady Hildegarde, the more anxiously affectionate she became; she called me "Gwen," and looked in to see "how we were getting on" at least once a day. One evening she hurried in in a state of breathless excitement.

"They have arrived," she announced. "Mrs Smith saw the station brougham loaded with luggage. I expect Lady Hildegarde will be in to see you to-morrow at cockcrow—well, at any rate, directly after breakfast."

"She does not know I am in Europe, much less in Stonebrook," replied Emma; "we never corresponded."

"Oh, that's nothing. I know from my own experience that she hates writing let-

ters—she never even writes to *me* ! But she is a dear, sweet thing, and never forgets her friends ; she is all heart. At the same time, I think that, perhaps, it would be well to drop her a nice little note. She might be startled to see you, or she might feel *hurt* to hear about you from a mere outsider. If you like to write a line, I will walk out to the lodge and leave it this afternoon.”

‘This kind offer Emma declined, but she accepted the hint, and tossed the following letter across the table to me that same evening. I read it and approved—all save the remarks about myself, which she refused to modify—and took it out and dropped it into the postoffice with my own hands. This is what it said—

“ DEAR LADY HILDEGARDE,

“ I am sure you will be surprised when

you look at the signature at the end of this note, and still more astonished to hear that I am living, temporarily, in your own part of the world with my step-daughter. I have met with sad changes since the happy days when you and I were in India. My dear husband was taken from me very suddenly; he was never a saving man, always so open-handed, and we had put by nothing. The old rajah, our friend—who was in bad health, and worked upon by native intrigues—treated me most strangely. He is dead, and his heir makes me a very small allowance, which is my sole income. I have, however, a kind, devoted daughter—step-daughter—who nurses me, spoils me, and shields me, just as her father used to do! I have also a stout heart, and some good friends; but my present life is a truly bitter contrast in every respect to the days

that are gone! when you knew me in Jam-Jam-More. I suppose—indeed, I am sure—that one cannot eat one's loaf and have it. I have eaten *my* loaf, and, now that my dear husband is gone, I have no spirit, nor, indeed, health, for anything; but there is my little girl of nineteen, with all her best days before her. I hope a few crumbs of pleasure may fall in her way. I came home nearly two years ago, and have lived in London until lately, but doctors have driven me out of it to find a more bracing air. We came to Stonebrook quite at haphazard, and I now think it was a most fortunate chance that guided me here, since I find that this little town is within a few miles of your home. I hope you and yours are well, and that I shall see you ere long. Believe me,

“Very sincerely yours,

“EMMA HAYES.”

There was no answer to this letter for three days, and then a messenger brought the following reply :—

“Coppingham Abbey, Thursday.

“DEAR MRS. HAYES,

“*So* sorry to hear of your bereavement. Accept our warmest sympathy for your sad loss. I am pleased to hear that you are within easy reach of me, but I must warn you that Stonebrook is a most unfortunate locality for any one at all delicate. You should lose *no time* in going farther south—say to Devonshire. I can recommend you to such nice lodgings in Torquay. I have an immensity to do, and am dreadfully busy, but I shall hope to go and see you ere long.

“Yours faithfully,

“HILDEGARDE SOMERS.”

“Well, so you’ve had a letter from her ladyship!” cried Miss Skuce. “I saw the servant leave it just now. I am certain she is enchanted at the prospect of seeing you!”

Emma commanded her countenance sufficiently to nod and smile. Oh, what hypocrites we are! Speaking for myself, I could have torn the note into fifty little pieces, and stamped upon it—yes, and it does me good to say so; but Emma had a sweet, long-suffering, gentle nature, whereas I was ever notorious for having a turbulent disposition and a proud spirit.

“She is in town this morning,” continued Miss Skuce, and she folded her hands and arranged her draperies, evidently prepared to indulge us with a protracted sitting. “I am certain she is coming to see you. No!”—starting a

little—"why, that is the Abbey carriage passing now. Look, Gwen, look!"

I bent my head forward, and saw a well-appointed landau, with fine big horses and powdered servants. Lady Hildegarde was lying back, wrapped in costly furs, and was engaged in an animated conversation with another lady—whose face was most beautifully painted.

"They lunch early, you see," explained Miss Skuce, apologetically. "She will be in this evening without fail"—rising as she spoke—"and if she says anything about *me*, you can tell her that I have been looking after you, dear Mrs. Hayes, and making you take care of your precious health." And she simpered herself out of the room.

Lady Hildegarde did not call that evening—no, not for a whole week. I noticed her driving by on several occasions. As

she did not know me by sight, I ventured on a good stare. She was a wonderful woman for her age—fifty (so said the “Peerage”), and she seemed very sprightly and entertaining as she talked to her invariable companion, always in the same vivacious fashion.

“How well she looks,” exclaimed Emma, peeping from the background; “how young, and handsome, and prosperous! No wonder the other lady laughs—she was always so amusing and irresistible.

“But I don’t like her face, Emma. With all its smiles, it could be very grim and hard.”

“Oh, my dearest Gwen, that is imagination; she has a most charming expression. When you know her, you feel that you could do *anything* for her!”

“Probably; but she would not do any-

thing for *me* ! I am positive that I shall not like her. She is home nearly a week, and I think she might have come to see you ! ”

“ My dear, fiery, touchy Gwen, she has so much to do—a great household, visitors, engagements, and she knows that she need not stand on ceremony with *me*, I who have nursed her, dressed her, written private letters for her, sat up with her at night. I don’t expect her to be ceremonious, as if I was a stranger—but young people are so hard—so exacting.”

“ I think she ought to be very grateful to you, Emma,” I persisted, doggedly.

“ I am certain that she is not a bit changed. Just like her son,” rejoined her loyal defender. “ We should think the best of every one ! I am sure she *is* just the same as ever.”

Two days more, and yet Lady Hilde-

garde had not called. Ten days had elapsed since her return, and she had not condescended to come and see us. Miss Skuce was visibly uneasy and rather snappish; also the Miss Bennys were a little cold in their manner when we accosted them after church, and Mrs. Gabb—oh, truly portentous symptom!—ceased to administer cups of tea gratis. At last, one evening quite late, when the chimney was smoking horribly, and there was no lump sugar for tea, she called—came in a one-horse brougham, and remained exactly seven minutes by the clock.

She was exceedingly gracious, shook Emma by both hands, talked of the dear old days in India, of clever, kind Dr. Hayes. “And so this is his daughter! I must have a good look at her,” scanning me up and down with her eyeglass. “She is like him, is she not? He

was fair, was not he—with a reddish beard? ”

“ Oh no,” replied Emma, and her voice trembled. “ I’m afraid you don’t quite remember him—he was very dark.”

“ Ah ! yes, so he was. I declare I was thinking of some one else. I meet such thousands of new people every year. One thing I have *not* forgotten : your too delicious wire mattresses—such a treat in India—and your charming landau on cee springs ; and, oh yes, those absurd old elephants ! Dear Mrs. Hayes,” gazing closely at Emma, “ you look as if this cold climate did not agree with you ; you have got quite hollow-cheeked and thin.”

“ I have been rather ailing,” said Emma, faintly.

“ You really must get away to Torquay this Christmas. Have you made any friends here? ”

“Scarcely friends,” was her reply; “though people have been most kind to me. My friends are in India.”

“I wonder you don’t go back to them! I really would advise it,” rising as she spoke. “Meanwhile, we must see something of you, and I’ll send you some game and fruit. Supposing”—and she hesitated for a moment—“you were to dine with us on Christmas Day, eh?—it will cheer you up—and bring the little girl, too—will you?”

“I am sure you are very kind, but——”

“Now, no buts,” she protested playfully. “We dine at eight. Just a family gathering; and, look here”—she seemed subject to afterthoughts—“I’ll send for you and send you home. I’ve had a good many drives in *your* carriage,” she added, quite affectionately.

I saw the tears standing in Emma’s

eyes. I was but a mere spectator, and had nothing to do but look on, and I had had ample opportunity of observing Lady Hildegarde. She afforded a sharp contrast to Emma, who seemed unusually small, delicate, and forlorn. Her visitor, who did not look her age, was tall, slight, and held herself well. She had a smooth and beautiful complexion, brown hair worn over a cushion, a pair of bright eyes, an animated expression, and a pointed chin. She was dressed in a sort of pelisse, richly trimmed with priceless sable, and a smart little French bonnet which bristled with wings.

“Now, I will take no excuse; there is no occasion for me to send you a formal card, is there?”

“Oh no, no,” protested Emma, eagerly.

“Then, Christmas Day is a fixture, remember. Be ready at half-past seven,

please, for Hugo is so fidgety about his horses, and hates them to be kept standing. On second thoughts, had you not better stay all night? Yes, that's it! Just bring a basket trunk, and we will send you home after breakfast. Now, now," with a gay, imperative gesture, "pray don't say a word—it is all settled;" and, with a hasty good-by, she was already at the door.

But it was Emma's turn to introduce an afterthought, and my impulsive little Irish stepmother cried, "Oh, do wait one second, Lady Hildegarde; I want to ask about your son." I was facing her ladyship, and noticed that her gracious countenance had assumed an impatient expression. This expression became absolutely grim as the words, "We saw him in London—he was *so* good to us!" fell on her ear.

“In London!” she repeated slowly, turning about to confront Emma, and speaking in a cool, constrained voice—an insolent voice. “How *did* he discover you?”

“Quite by accident, I assure you!” Why should Emma’s tone so suddenly assume an apologetic key? “We met at the Stores!”

“The Stores!”—a pregnant pause—“Oh, so *you* were the people?” She paused again, and continued in a more genial tone, “I think I did hear something about it!” I was certain that she had heard everything about it, and had been greatly displeased; but why?

“Where is Mr. Everard Somers?” pursued Emma, rather timidly; “and how is he?”

“He is quite well, and rambling about as usual. Well, now, I must *really* go.

Good-by. So glad to have seen you," and she once more nodded affectionately to Emma. I opened the door for her, and she rustled down-stairs with a footstep as light and rapid as if she had been but eighteen. In another moment we heard the bang of the carriage door—a bang that seemed to say to me, "Thank goodness, *that* is over!"—and then she drove off.

"*How* kind!" cried Emma. "Just her dear old self, isn't she, darling? Now, come, what did I tell you?" stroking my smileless face.

"I don't think her kindness is so very remarkable, after all," I grumbled, as I tidied up a chair-back.

"How difficult it is to please you young people! What more *would* you expect, than to be asked to dinner on Christmas Day, to have a carriage sent for you, and to remain at the Abbey all night?"

I made no reply. Perhaps I was grasping, perhaps I was too sanguine, too childish ; but I had expected something totally different. Happy are those who do not expect !

“ Well, has she been to call yet ? ” demanded Miss Skuce, in a querulous voice, as she entered our apartments the next morning.

“ Oh yes, last evening,” I answered promptly, with a sense of relief.

“ Last *evening* ! Nonsense ! ” was the rude response. “ I never saw the carriage. It wasn’t in the street.”

“ At any rate, it was here yesterday,” replied Emma, rather stiffly.

“ When ? ” very sharply.

“ About half-past five or six o’clock ; it was quite dark.”

“ Pitch dark of course. Dear me, what a strange hour ! ”

“Well, you see, as Lady Hildegarde says herself, there is no occasion to be ceremonious with *me*.”

“That’s true,” brightening up. “And what else did she say?”

“Oh, she talked of India and of old times. She has invited us to dinner on Christmas Day.”

“Come! that is a compliment. For, of course, it’s a family party. But how will you get there? Scott never hires out his flies on Christmas Day.”

“Lady Hildegarde has kindly offered to send for us.”

“Nonsense!—and Mr. Somers is so churlish of his horses?”

“Yes, we are to sleep at the Abbey that night,” said Emma, carelessly.

“Well, upon my word, I call that doing it comfortably. I am so glad,” suddenly rising and wringing Emma’s hand. “You

will enjoy it! Christmas at the Abbey! You will have no end to tell us. Oh, by the way, did you—did she—mention me?"

"No," was the rather shamefaced admission.

Miss Skuce looked extremely glum.

"You see," continued Emma, "she was not here long, and was entirely taken up with other topics—India, you know. However, when I am under her roof, I shall certainly make a point of telling her of your kindness."

"Oh, no, no, no—ten thousand times no! It's not worth mentioning, only that I am *sure* she would be glad to know that, in her absence, her friends were taken good care of. I'll bring you some eggs to-morrow." (There had been a considerable pause with regard to these eggs.) Finally Miss Skuce kissed Emma with almost passionate fervor—believing that

a peeress had left a recent impress on the same pale lips—and went forth in haste to spread the news.

It lost nothing in the telling! Lady Hildegarde had lunched—no, she had had tea with us. The Hayes were going to stay at the Abbey—to *live* there. Lady Hildegarde had adopted Miss Hayes. It took ten days to sift facts from fiction, and then it was generally allowed that we were to dine at the Abbey, that one of the Abbey carriages was to fetch us, and we were to remain all night. To be invited to dine at the Abbey on Christmas Day was a conspicuous favor, and civilities, which had somewhat flagged within the last few weeks, were now rekindled more warmly than ever.

CHAPTER VII.

FOUR IN A FLY.

A FEW days before Christmas, Emma and I were taking a constitutional (a walk for duty, not for pleasure) between two bare uninteresting hedges, about a mile from Stonebrook. We had been stitching all the morning at the dress in which I was to make my *début* at the Abbey—a rich white satin, long and plain, which Emma had worn but once, and that fitted me with surprisingly little alteration, beyond lengthening the skirt.

This tramp along a muddy footpath was the result of my companion's extreme anxiety with respect to my complexion!

I had been forced abroad—much against my inclination—to “get a color.” As we trudged together, in somewhat gloomy silence, a smart little sandy-haired horse-woman trotted gaily by, followed by a groom. She glanced at us carelessly in passing, looked back, and finally drew up short. It was Mrs. Cholmondeley.

“Oh, so pleased to meet you!” she cried vivaciously. “How do you do, Mrs. Hayes?” nodding carelessly to Emma. Then, leaning down, and addressing me particularly, “I’m having a party to-morrow night, some music and a little dance. It would be a *big* dance if *I* had anything to do with it; but Jack won’t hear of that. He declares that it keeps people up too late, and hunting people should all be up at cockcrow. However, this function to-morrow will be over early, and I shall be so glad if you can come!

I'm rather short of girls—of pretty ones, I mean. I can reckon on any number of plain ones!”

Who could resist such an invitation? I hesitated. I felt my face becoming rather warm. Surely I had a color now! Mrs. Cholmondeley was struck by it, for she exclaimed—

“Oh, my dear! I wish I had your complexion!—your lovely roses!”

She was not aware that I owed my lovely roses to the fact that she had ignored Emma as absolutely as if she had been my nurse.

“You know it's only for young people, Mrs. Hayes,” she explained. “It would bore you to death. Chaperons are quite exploded, and girls go about everywhere now by themselves.”

“So I hear,” answered Emma, meekly. “And I am sure Gwen would be delighted

to accept your kind invitation ; but I don't think she could very well go alone, and it's a long drive."

"I can easily settle all that. The Bennys shall call for her. Leave it all to me, please, and I'll arrange everything. I'll chaperon her myself, and take every care of her. Remember, she is to wear her smartest frock, and bring her roses."

"But, really, we scarcely know the Misses Benny sufficiently well to ask——"

"But *I* know them, and *I'll* ask. Now, please, Mrs. Hayes, don't throw any more obstacles in the child's way. The Bennys will call for your charming daughter at nine o'clock to-morrow evening. If they call in vain, I shall never, never speak to you again." And, with a smiling nod, she gave her impatient horse the rein, and trotted briskly away.

Here was something to discuss during

the remainder of our walk, and over our tea!

“ I am sure the Bennys will *hate* having to take me,” I remarked. “ I would really rather brave Mrs. Cholmondeley’s wrath and not go. She might have asked me before, if she desired my company so much ; and I think it is extremely rude of her to leave you out, and declare that you would be bored. Why should you be more bored than *I* ? ”

“ You are quite different, dear. You don’t understand.”

“ No, I don’t understand,” I answered with angry impatience ; “ and I am not going.”

“ Oh, but, Gwen, I *wish* you to go. Go to please me. You never get any variety or amusement.”

“ It will be no amusement to me to drive six miles cramped up in a fly with

the Miss Bennys, and to sit for a couple of hours with my back to the wall, not knowing a soul to speak to."

"There will be music; and I dare say Mrs. Cholmondeley will get you some partners. Your dress is ready. I hope it won't take any harm. It is not as if it was going to be a regular ball; if it was, I should be afraid to risk it. I want to keep the bloom on it for Christmas Day. I don't suppose there will be a large gathering at the Moate, for I doubt if Mrs. Cholmondeley is in the best set. She is of no family, so Miss Skuce said, but had an immense fortune—made in margarine. It was kind of her to ask you, darling; and I really think you ought to take her invitation as it was meant—and go."

At this moment Mrs. Gabb appeared, with a cocked-hat note between her finger and thumb.

“It’s from the Dovecote, please, Miss ; and the boy is in the hall waiting for an answer.”

The missive was addressed to me, and proved to be unexpectedly cordial. It said—

“DEAR MISS HAYES,

“We shall be delighted to take you to Mrs. Cholmondeley’s tomorrow evening, and will call for you at a quarter to nine.

“Yours very sincerely,

“JESSICA BENNY.”

“There ! You see you have no alternative,” cried Emma, triumphantly. “Just scribble a nice little note and say that you accept their kind offer with much pleasure.”

When I had despatched my reply, and taken up my needlework, Emma continued—

“I wonder if you will know any one in the room. I do *hope* Lady Hildegarde will be there. I am sure she will look after you, and make it pleasant for you.”

I was not so sanguine on this point, but I merely said with a laugh—

“Perhaps we shall have Lady Polexfen, too. Do you think *she* will make it pleasant for me?”

“She is a cold, arrogant wretch; not one bit like her mother or her brother. I wish he were to be there. He would be sure to notice you.”

“Notice me!” I echoed.

“There, now—there, now! My dear Gwen, you know what I mean. No offense, as they say. Upon my word, when your eyes flash like that, I feel quite terrified. I cannot think where you get your pride—and you are desperately proud—certainly not from your poor dear

father. He had not a scrap of pride—except—just on one subject.” And she gazed rather dreamily at the lamp.

“And what was that subject?” I inquired.

No answer. She did not seem to hear me. Her thoughts were far away.

“What subject, Emma,” I repeated, “was my father’s one sensitive point?”

“Oh”—rather confusedly—“it was an old, old story. It is no use in recalling it now. Would you mind running into my room, dear, and fetching me the large scissors?”

It was evident that my usually communicative stepmother wished to change the conversation.

The next evening I placed myself and my toilet entirely in Emma’s hands. She was a clever hairdresser, and lingered long over my adornment; it being, as she con-

fessed to me, "a labor of love." When the last pin had been fastened, she surveyed me with an air of critical approval, and said—

"Now, Gwen, look at yourself, and tell me your candid opinion of Miss Hayes?"

I rose up and surveyed my appearance in a narrow little mirror in her wardrobe, whilst Emma stood on a chair and held the flat candle triumphantly over my head.

I wore my thick fair hair turned off my face as usual; a long plain white satin gown, a lace fichu knotted in front, and a little gold necklet and locket which had once belonged to my own mother.

"I think, since you ask me," I said, "that Miss Hayes is absurdly overdressed, most unsuitably got up. This magnificent satin, this cobwebby lace, are ridiculously out of place on *me*."

“They don’t look out of place, I can assure you; you become them to the manner born. You might be a countess in your own right, as far as your appearance and style are concerned. I must say, Gwen, that you are a girl that it is a pleasure to dress; you have quite a grand air, such a remarkable carriage.”

“Carriage!” I repeated, with a laugh of scorn. “I wish I *had* a carriage—yes, and a pair—so that I need not intrude upon the Miss Bennys; three in a fly are too many.”

“Oh, and do take care of your gown, darling; lift it up well, and hold the train in your lap. This is only a dress rehearsal for Christmas Day, and I should be *so* vexed if you got your frock tumbled or soiled.”

I promised in the most solemn manner to take the greatest care of my toilet, and

refused for the tenth time the eagerly pressed loan of her diamond brooch, "just to give the lace a finish."

"My dear Emma, I am going to this party to please you; I am wearing lace and satin fit for a duchess to please you; but I really must decline the diamonds. As it is, people will be quite sufficiently tickled, when they compare my costume with my position and surroundings; they will say all sorts of nasty things."

"They will say you are a princess in disguise!"

"Pooh! they will say I am a pauper who has been swindling some London dressmaker! I shall make myself small, and sit in a corner, and try and escape notice," and I sailed into the sitting-room.

Here I found an immediate opportunity of testing the effect of my transformation. Mrs. Gabb, who (as an excuse to obtain a

private view) was making up the fire, dropped the poker with a frightful clang, as she ejaculated—

“ Good laws—laws me ! Well—I never ! ” which I accepted as a very handsome tribute to my splendid appearance. In another five minutes the glories of my costume were concealed beneath a long fur-trimmed evening cloak (yet another relic of Emma’s wealthy days), and I found myself shut into a fly, with my back to the horse, and driving away with the two Miss Bennys and Mrs. Montmorency Green, their cousin. I ventured to thank them, rather timidly.

“ It is so very kind of you to take me,” I murmured; “ and I am quite ashamed of crushing you like this.”

“ Well, you must only make yourself as *small* as you can,” said the elder, with asperity. “ We would do *anything* to

oblige dear Mrs. Cholmondeley ; and she made quite a point of our taking you with us."

The tone in which this was said left no doubt on my mind that Miss Benny was extremely surprised at Mrs. Cholmondeley's enthusiasm.

" I suppose it will not be a large party ? " I hazarded, still more timidly.

" Not a large party ! We shall have half the county ; *every one* will be there. The Moate is such a dear old place—splendid pictures, grand reception-rooms—and the Cholmondeleys do everything so well ; they gave three weeks' invitation, so it's sure to be extra smart ! "

Three weeks' invitation, and I had been asked at the eleventh hour ! I now shrank into my corner of the fly and relapsed into silence, feeling as small as Miss Benny could possibly desire.

As we bowled steadily along the hard country roads, my three companions launched into the news of the neighborhood, entirely ignoring my presence. I gathered that Mrs. Montmorency Green was a newcomer, and that her cousins were anxious to post her up in all the fashionable intelligence.

"They have a large house-party at the Moate, and there will be a lawn meet to-morrow," said Miss Benny.

"I wonder if the Somers will give a dance this winter?" added her sister. "I should like Annie here to see the Abbey—it's such a wonderful old place. The library is what was once the monks' refectory."

"Oh, there will be no dances at the Abbey now that Lady Hildegarde has married her *daughter*," remarked her sister decisively.

“ But she has a son ! ”

“ My dear Jessica, a mother does not give balls for her son : she leaves that to other women ! ”

“ They have lost a lot of money lately ; old Mr. Somers is in his dotage, and has burnt his fingers badly over investments in South America, and the son *must* marry money. Both families wish him to marry ” —here the fly rattled over a sheet of stones, and I lost the name. “ His mother is quite determined about it. I don’t call her a good-looking girl, and I can’t imagine what any of the men see in her, except unlimited effrontery. She calls herself advanced. *I* call her abominably fast. She goes about everywhere alone, just as she pleases, hunts, and keeps racehorses. They say her style of conversation is most extraordinary. She shoots, smokes, fishes, and rules her poor father with a rod of

iron. In fact, she is just like a young man !”

“ Only, young men don’t generally rule their fathers with a rod of iron,” said the cousin, smartly.

“ And I don’t believe that she keeps racehorses,” put in Miss Jessica.

“ I should like to see her. I hope she will be at this place to-night,” remarked Mrs. Green. “ If she is, you must be sure and point her out.”

“ Oh, you may easily recognize her! She is always surrounded by a multitude of men, and you can hear her voice above the band !” rejoined Miss Benny. Then, suddenly, to me, “ Are you asleep, Miss Hayes ?”

“ Oh no.”

“ I’m afraid ”—with a sigh—“ you will find it rather dull to-night, as you are a stranger, and know so few people. How-

ever, you can amuse yourself looking at the pictures—they are all masterpieces, and there is sure to be a good supper.”

I made no reply. No doubt I must make up my mind to play the *rôle* of looker-on ; I was well accustomed to the part.

We were now in the avenue, which was very long, and quite a string of carriages were already disgorging their contents. We drove under a portico, stepped out on red cloth, were ushered up by powdered footmen, and passed on to the ladies' room, where three or four smart maids were ready to relieve us of our wraps. The Miss Bennys and their cousin nodded to several acquaintances, and made a bold and combined assault upon the dressing-table. The sisters Benny were dressed alike in prim black evening dresses, with stiff little bouquets pinned in on the left side—just over the region of the heart.

Their hair was extremely neat, and really their anxiety was unnecessary ; however, they powdered their noses and twitched their fringes ; meanwhile, I had divested myself of my long mantle, and patiently awaited their good pleasure.

At last they were ready, and as Miss Benny's eyes fell on me I saw a change come over her whole face. She glanced expressively at her relatives, and then again at me. As I waited humbly for her to pass out, she found her voice.

" Upon *my* word ! " she exclaimed, with a very forced smile. " If we are to go by *appearances*, Miss Hayes "—now looking me up and down from head to foot—" we should walk after *you* ! " And then, with a violent toss of her head, she led the way out of the room, followed by her cousin, Miss Jessica Benny, and last and least—myself.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE CHALGROVE EYEBROWS.

WE passed into a large, oak-paneled hall, and then up a wide, shallow staircase, carpeted with soft crimson carpet, and lined with large oil paintings, chiefly portraits. At the head of the stairs we were received by Mrs. Cholmondeley, all smiles, diamonds, and blue crêpe. She was surrounded by a crowd which appeared to have overflowed from the reception-rooms. Our hostess passed on my three companions, with three smiles and three hurried nods, but looked at me for quite five seconds, and, putting forth a most dainty hand, drew me affectionately towards her.

"She is in my charge now," she called after the Miss Bennys. "Thank you *so* much. Dear me!" she continued, turning to me with a little dry laugh, "do you know that you are a very pretty and distinguished-looking girl, and are bound to be the belle of the evening? Yes, indeed, my charming, blushing Cinderella. Aubrey Price, come here," beckoning to an extremely lackadaisical young man, who now lazily approached. "I give Miss Hayes into your charge. Take the greatest care of her. Take her to the refreshment-room—the morning-room, you know—and get her tea—or something."

And, behold! I was launched out there and then into an acquaintance. My cavalier surveyed me, and I surveyed my cavalier, with much gravity. He was fair, slight, rather good-looking, and clean-shaven. He displayed a vast expanse of

shirt-front, and wore a pair of exquisitely fitting gloves.

“Well, I suppose we must obey orders,” he answered, “whether you want tea or not.”

We accordingly wended our way to the buffet, where he exerted himself to procure me a cup of coffee, and stood and watched me as I sipped it. I looked up suddenly, and caught his rather small, keen blue eyes fixed on me, and nearly upset the contents of my cup over the front of my immaculate white gown.

“These sort of half-and-half affairs are ghastly,” he remarked, as he took my cup. “Don’t you think so?”

“No; I do not,” I answered bravely, for this fine old house, crowds of gay, well-dressed people, delicious strains of a string band, lights, flowers, pictures, were to my mind extremely enjoyable.

“But, of course, I should prefer a real dance.”

“And I should *not*,” he rejoined energetically. “Here, at least, you can sneak away and go to sleep in a comfortable armchair; but at what you call a ‘real dance,’ upon my word, the way in which hostesses drive and hustle one about is enough to call for the intervention of the police or the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals; and, if you stand against a wall, people trample on your feet!” At the mere recollection of his sufferings, he almost looked as if he was going to cry.

“The remedy is in your own hands,” I replied unfeelingly. “*Dance.*”

“No, no,”—shaking his head,—“not if I know it. I don’t mind sitting out now and then, just to oblige; but I draw the line at dancing. I’m too old.”

I gazed at him in amazement. He could not be more than four or five-and-twenty at the most.

“Then why do you go to dances, where you are so cruelly ill-used?” I asked; “hustled, as you say, and driven about and trampled on?”

“Oh, I only go when duty calls me, and, thank goodness, that is not often. When the ball is given by one’s cousin’s cousin, or one’s aunt, or some old pal of my governor’s.”

“Then your father is actually alive?”

“Alive! I should think so! And a younger man than I am. *He* dances, so does my mother.”

“Really! And you go about in a bath-chair?”

“Well, not just *yet*. I’m not altogether so feeble as I look”—in a bantering tone.

“I say, are you staying in the house?”

"No ; I have only just arrived."

"Then"—with much animation—"did you notice if it was freezing when you came along?"

"No ; it was just beginning to drizzle."

"Then that's all right. You see, the hounds meet here to-morrow, the best draw at this side of the county, and the country is all plain sailing, very sound going. You hunt, of course?"

"No, indeed. But do you?"

"Don't I? Every one hunts down here. I've had fifty days this winter already."

"Oh, then you are not too decrepit to ride?" I inquired.

He stared at me for a second, and burst into a roar of laughter as he answered—

"I hunt six days a week regular ; there's nothing to touch it."

"You must require a good many horses."

"Yes, pretty well ; I have thirty, but

two of them are dead lame, and three are mere jumping hacks. Would you like to come down-stairs and do the picture-gallery? This blessed demi-semi dance won't begin for an hour."

"I should like to see the pictures very much indeed," I answered; and we made our way slowly back to the head of the stairs. The crowd was immense. There seemed to be two or three hundred people present. The grand staircase was deserted now. Guests had arrived and ebbed away to the ball-room or tea-room. We descended the delightfully shallow stairs side by side, I moving with the dignity due to my rich satin train, which trailed behind me languidly.

There were some new arrivals in the hall, chiefly men. One of them looked up suddenly, and I saw that it was Mr. Somers. He contemplated me and my

cavalier with unconcealed surprise. However, he had evidently made up his mind that I was no ghost, but my own solid self, for as I put my white slipper on the last step, he came forward with an outstretched hand, and said—

“How do you do, Miss Hayes? You were the last to speed me, and almost the first person I meet when I return home. Hullo, Aubrey,” to my companion, “going strong, eh? How are all the horses?”

“Oh, fairly fit. When did you come back?”

“This afternoon; and my sister put me on duty at once, you see. She is stopping all night for the meet to-morrow, and so am I.”

“So am I,” echoed the other triumphantly.

“How is Mrs. Hayes?” inquired Mr. Somers. “Is she here this evening?”

"She is pretty well, thank you. No, she is not here to-night."

"Are you staying in the neighborhood?"

"Yes ; for the present—at Stonebrook."

"I'm delighted to hear it. Where are *you* bound for, Aubrey?"

"We are going to do the pictures. I'm showman."

"What a preposterous fraud! Miss Hayes, he knows no more of pictures than he does of making a watch! I'll take you round the gallery ; at least, I know a Landseer from a Rubens."

"Not a little bit of it," rejoined the other. "Miss Hayes was given into my sole charge—were you not, Miss Hayes?—and I am responsible for her. Go upstairs—you will find some old friends," he added, rather significantly.

During this polite competition for my

company, Miss Benny and her cousin had been hovering about in our vicinity, and now accosted me—

“Ahem, Miss Hayes, my dear, the dancing will not begin for half an hour; don’t you think you had better come and sit with *us* till then?”

But I had not forgotten my recent treatment at her hands, and said—

“Oh, thank you, Miss Benny, I am just going to see the pictures, as you recommended, and you know I *have* sat with you for nearly an hour already in the fly, and you will have me again going back.”

Miss Benny sniffed, glared, and backed herself away in purple wrath.

“I see you are a match for Miss Benny,” said Mr. Somers, with a grin.

“Miss Hayes is a match for most people. She has been pitching into *me*

for not dancing," said my escort with serene complacency.

"And quite right too, you *are* a lazy beggar!"

But I noticed that Mr. Somers looked at me with a puzzled air. I dare say he scarcely recognized the meek, shabbily dressed girl of last July in the present Miss Hayes. I was puzzled also—I scarcely recognized myself. I was *tête montée*; my surroundings, my splendid gown, had transformed me; it was certainly another young woman, a total stranger, who was sauntering about in my body, and treading on air!

"When the dancing begins I shall fetch you, Miss Hayes. I hope you will give me the first waltz," and he took out a small pencil, "and two others. May I have five and ten?"

"Yes; but I should warn you that I am not an experienced performer."

“So much the better; you won’t want to steer,” writing rapidly on his shirt cuff.

To my great surprise I saw Mr. Aubrey Price also preparing *his* shirt cuff for manuscript.

“And I—how many may I have, if you please?”

“Oh, really, I should not like to victimize you,” I protested.

“Nonsense! Shall we say the first square and the *pas de quatre*?”

“Very well, if it will not be too fatiguing for you,” I replied, and he also scribbled on his cuff; and then we walked on into the picture-gallery.

The gallery was full of people, and between looking at them and the pictures the moments flew. I had not half made the tour of the paintings when I found Mr. Somers already claiming me. We went up-stairs to the dancing-room—two

immense drawing-rooms, decorated with flowers and palms. The deep windows held seats, and there were two or three sofas at one end of the ball-room, otherwise it was empty. A string band was stationed in the conservatory. Many couples were swimming round to the strains of the Hydropaten waltz, and in another second Mr. Somers and I had joined them.

The floor was perfect, and the music corresponded. Dancing came to me almost by nature, and I had been extremely well taught; then I was young, slender, tireless. We went round, and round, and round, with an easy swing, until the waltz ceased in one long-drawn-out, wo-begone wail.

“Thank you,” said my partner; “that *was* a treat! Your estimation of your dancing is too modest. You dance like a South American.”

As I had never seen a South American, I could not say whether that was a compliment or otherwise. Whilst we threaded our way into the tea-room, I noticed that my partner appeared to know every one, and that they all seemed glad to see him. Smiling ladies accosted him and asked when he had come back; men slapped him on the shoulder, and I noticed that some looked hard at him, and then sharply at me. At last we reached our goal, and as he brought me an ice he said—

“Where did you learn to dance?”

“In Paris. I was at school there for four years.”

“Then, of course, you speak French like a native?”

“I can make myself understood.”

“I see you are accustomed to under-rate your accomplishments. Shall we go

into the next room, and get out of this crush ? ”

We moved into what was Mrs. Cholmondeley's boudoir, and was now reserved for sitters-out. Here I recognized several familiar faces. Amongst them the Miss Bennys and their cousin, who were seated in a row watching me. Close beside us, before the fire, stood an animated, not to say noisy group, consisting of half a dozen young men and several girls. One of the latter was the center of attraction ; every one of the others seemed to address her, or to wish for her sole attention, and I did not wonder. She appeared to be exceedingly vivacious and amusing, and was pretty and uncommon-looking. Her costume was peculiar, but I rightly guessed it to be the work of a Parisian artiste. The body was of black *crêpe de Chine* gathered into bands of gold embroi-

dery, the shirt of white brocade, with a thick border of Neapolitan violets ; a crimson crêpe scarf was tied negligently round her dainty waist, violets were tucked into her bodice and her hair, which was fair and very abundant. She had penciled, dark eyebrows, and dark gray eyes, which former afforded a striking contrast to her light locks. I never saw any one with a more piquant expression, or with such a wonderfully varied play of features. She wore unusually long gloves, and brandished an enormous black feather fan, as she talked with much volubility. Suddenly she caught sight of my companion, and paused as he said—

“ How are you, Miss Chalgrove ? ”

“ Why, Everard ! ” she exclaimed, “ I had no idea you were here, though I knew you were expected. Why did you not come with Maudie ? ”

“I had only just arrived, and, like you ladies, I had all my unpacking to do, and to dress and fix my hair.”

“But you had no dinner here——?”

“Yes, I had something on the stairs, like the children. Have you had good sport this winter?”

“Capital! I’ve brought one of my gees here; father is here, too. He has brought old Champion.”

“I saw him going very well on Saturday week,” put in a tall, thin man. “From Benson’s Cross, you know. He was quite in the first flight in that second run, you remember.”

And now every one of these people began to talk clamorously, and at once—and all about hunting. Their conversation was extraordinary (to an outsider). Mr. Somers was drawn into the conversation, and was not a whit behind-hand; but just

flowed like a tide into the subject, as interested and excited as the most rabid fox-hunter among them. I caught such scraps as—"Got hung up in a nasty corner," "Miss Flagg at the bottom of a ditch, her saddle in one field, her horse in the other," "scent catchy," "foxes not very good," "drains all open," "the pace terrific," "the ladies screaming behind him." It was all Greek to me.

I stood a little aloof, though not conspicuously so—for the room was full—and watched this girl. She had a loud, clear, far-carrying voice and laugh; she was small, slight, and dazzlingly fair, her fair skin enhanced by her black brows and lashes. Somehow, her face seemed familiar to me; she was like some one I knew. Who could it be? As I meditated, I glanced unconsciously into the great mirror above the chimney-piece, in which we were all

reflected, and instantly recognized who it was that she resembled. It was *myself*! I recalled with a sudden thrill that my own mother's name was Chalgrove. Perhaps this girl was some connection—perhaps my cousin! More unlikely things might be!

She was smart, popular, pretty, wealthy, and what is known as “in the swim.” She was holding quite a small court on the hearthrug—a gay, quick-witted, and capricious queen.

What a contrast to myself—a poor obscure nobody, and at the present moment nothing more nor less than a mere daw decked out in peacock's feathers! I gazed at Miss Chalgrove—I had heard of her—Lord Chalgrove's sole child and heiress. I stared at her contemplatively in the mirror; suddenly she looked up, and our eyes met! Whatever she was about to say

died away in a sort of broken sentence, and then she unexpectedly touched me on the arm with her fan, and said with a radiant smile—

“ Yes, I see it too! Is it not *extraordinary*? We are as like as the proverbial two peas; only you are the better looking of the two—the sweet pea, and I am the common or garden pea! Joking apart, we might be sisters. Where *did* you get the Chalgrove eyebrows and upper lip? ”

I colored furiously, for I was instantly the center of attention. It seemed to me that every eye was fastened on my face, and the distinctive Chalgrove features! To my immense relief, Mrs. Cholmondeley at this moment made a sort of swoop into our circle, saying as she did so—

“ Come away, my dearest child! you have fallen for your sins into the hunting set. They can talk, think, dream of noth-

ing else. Were they not talking of horses? Oh, Mr. Somers, your sister is looking for you."

I heard a scrap of another conversation as I was being swept off—the words, "My double—who is she?"

"I see," continued my hostess, "you are getting on capitally! I'm going to introduce you to Sir Fulke Martin. He *asked* to be presented. He is immensely rich, so be sure you are *very* nice to him!"

CHAPTER IX.

“WE NEED NOT ASK IF YOU HAVE ENJOYED YOURSELF.”

SIR FULKE, who appeared to be expecting us, was a stout, bald gentleman, with a pair of hard brown eyes and a fixed smile. He bowed profoundly over his stiff shirt-front, as we were introduced; then Mrs. Cholmondeley immediately cut me adrift, saying in her quick little way—

“Now, Sir Fulke, there is a dance going on. Do take Miss Hayes into the ball-room!”

Sir Fulke piloted me carefully—danced with me carefully, but there was not the

same swing and go as with my former partner. Sir Fulke gasped out several leading questions, and threw out filmy feelers in order to discover who I was, and where I came from. I did not satisfy his curiosity. Perhaps, if he had known that he was merely dancing with Miss Hayes, who lived in cheap lodgings in Stonebrook, he would have abandoned me in the middle of the room! He was very full of information about himself, and talked of his place, his shooting, his hunters, his intimate friend the Duke of Albion, and his sister la Comtesse de Boulotte.

As we danced, he paused several times to rest and to take breath, and as we stood against the wall on one occasion, I found that my neighbor was Miss Chalgrove.

"Ah, so *here* you are!" she exclaimed gaily. "We ought to know one another, don't you think so—and without any

formal introduction? Are you staying in Stonebrook?"

"Yes, for the present."

"You hunt, of *course*?" gazing at me eagerly.

"Not I. I have never even been on a horse's back."

"*What!*" she ejaculated, as if such an idea was too difficult to grasp.

"Then we are not alike in everything. Why, I"—touching herself with her fan—"live in the saddle—spend my days there, and would sleep there if it were possible."

"Yes, I know. I've heard you are a splendid horsewoman."

"I'm going to have such a day to-morrow! I've brought over a new hunter, a French steeplechaser, and mean to cut them all down—men and women. Look out, and you'll see an account in the *Field*."

“Yes—I shall certainly look for it, and I hope you will get the brush.”

“Have you any sisters?” she asked suddenly.

“No—no sisters or brothers.”

“Neither have I. How I wish——”

Whatever she was about to wish was cut short by her impatient partner, who now put in his claim, and plunged along with her into the revolving crowd.

I danced with Mr. Aubrey Price (the owner of thirty hunters), and as we subsequently promenaded in the long corridor, we encountered a spare, gray-haired, gentlemanly man, who stared so fixedly at me that I felt quite uncomfortable.

“That is Lord Chalgrove,” said Mr. Price. “He looked as if he knew you?”

“Oh no, he does not. I have never seen him in my life.”

“Well, I *hope* he will manage to recog-

nize you again, at any rate. I wish he would keep his daughter in order! What do you think she said to me just now?"

"I am sure I cannot imagine."

"That she would like to hold a class to teach young men manners?"

"Were you to be a pupil?"

"Of *course*! I shouldn't wonder if my would-be teacher comes to grief to-morrow. It's a nasty country, tricky fences, and, by Jove! by all accounts, she has got a horse to match."

"Why does her father allow her to ride him?"

"*Allow* her! It's little you know Dolly Chalgrove. She allows *him* to hunt—she allows him to call his soul his own! He gives her a very loose rein; he is a widower, you see, and she's his only child, and very clever and taking, and like a sister of his that was ill-treated and that

died, and so he makes it up to Dolly. Capital business for Dolly, eh ? ”

“ Yes, I suppose it is, in some ways.”

“ A wonderful girl to ride to hounds, has a string of hunters and pays top prices ; very odd, but very good-hearted and genuine—no nonsense about her. They say she is to marry Somers. I’m not sure that *he* quite sees it, but his mother is awfully keen on it. He will be Lord Chalgrove if he lives long enough ; his father is the next male heir, and it would be a sound thing to keep the money and the title in the same family. The Somers are fearfully hard up.”

“ Are they ? ”

“ Yes ; so I suppose it is bound to come off. Lady Hildegarde is very strong.”

“ Then you take for granted that Miss Chalgrove would accept Mr. Somers as a matter——”

"As a matter of course," he finished briskly.

"What nonsense! How can you tell?"

"A straw shows how the wind blows!"

"I give you that straw for your opinion, and," now warming up, "I think it is too bad to discuss a girl, and take all sorts of things for granted. It is taking a great liberty with her name."

"Hullo, *now* I'm catching it! I mean no harm; every one discusses his neighbors' little affairs. I don't know what we should do without them. If you bar that subject, what *are* we to talk about—come now?"

"Books, politics, the weather."

"No, thank you"—with great scorn.

"Well, then, horses."

"Ah, that's better."

We were now in the ball-room once

more, where we were promptly joined by Mr. Somers.

"You look as if you two were quarreling," he remarked; "so I think I had better separate you at once."

"Yes, I'm crushed flat. I'm not to talk of my neighbors. We have fought over Miss Chalgrove."

"Indeed! That is strange, for she and I have just had a severe passage-at-arms."

"Oh, that does not surprise me! It's quite *en règle*," and he grinned significantly.

Mr. Somers took no notice of the impudent hint, but said, "It's about a horse she will ride, in spite of her father or any one—a steeplechaser she has picked up—and she is bound to have some nasty accident if some one does not shoot him. I've a good mind to shoot him myself, although he is a magnificent fencer, and

can go all day—a French horse, called Diab^{le} Vert.”

“Oh, by Jove! I know him—a real nasty-tempered brute. He won two or three good races, and then cut up rusty. They say he killed a jockey at Auteuil.”

I stood against the wall between the two men as they talked, and noticed that the sofas were occupied, the recesses of the windows full of lookers-on. Lady Bloss and her daughter were sitting together, and surveying me and my companions with unaffected interest. The former presently beckoned to me to approach. I did so, rather reluctantly, followed by my two cavaliers, whilst Sir Fulke hovered at a little distance.

“Oh, good evening, Miss Hayes,” said Lady Bloss, in her loftiest manner. “So surprised to see *you* here!”—looking me

slowly up and down. “ Pray, where is Mrs. Hayes? ”

“ She is at home,” I meekly replied.

“ And so you came alone ; how very independent ! ”

“ Oh no ; I came with the Miss Bennys.”

“ I did not know that you ever went out of an evening. We had a little dance last week, and I would have asked you, only I did not think you would like the *expense* of a fly ! ” And she threw back her head, and sniffed.

I am sure Mr. Somers heard, and also Mr. Price ; and a girl at the other side of Lady Bloss tittered quite audibly.

I, however, merely bowed. It was a safe reply. What could I say ?—the expense of a fly *was* an object to me. However, I was soon whirling round the room with my partner ; and I had numerous

partners, I could have danced every dance thrice over. Yes, I was enjoying myself enormously. I suppose my head was turned; I could not understand myself. I was surely a changeling. My luxurious surroundings, my splendid gown had transformed me. As I have said before, it was another young woman than Gwendoline Hayes—a stranger, who was walking about in her body, who received admiring glances with an air of cool unconcern, who accepted Sir Fulke's and Mr. Price's *petits soins* with affable condescension.

I saw Lady Polexfen fanning herself languidly in the doorway. As I passed out on her brother's arm there was a block, and we stood for an instant side by side. She was splendidly dressed in silver brocade and sea-green, and ablaze with diamonds; her waist resembled an hour-glass,

and her hair was dressed French style, over her ears. She affected not to see me, but she was as fully conscious of my vicinity as I was of hers. A tall, dark, sardonic man was beside her. Her brother did not notice her, but I did, as she turned to the dark man and whispered something, at which he laughed delightedly—and then looked hard at me.

Mr. Somers took me in to supper. It was served at little tables—a commendable arrangement—and we sat down *tête-à-tête*.

"I suppose you are staying with friends in the neighborhood?" said my companion in his genial voice.

"No; we are only in lodgings in Stonebrook."

"Lodgings! I did not know there were such things to be had. Don't you find it rather—rather—slow?"

"We must cut our coat according to

our cloth. We cannot afford grand quarters." (I saw his eyes fixed momentarily on my, so to speak, "coat" of filmy lace and satin.) "The doctors ordered my stepmother out of London to some dry, bracing climate. Of course, we should have preferred Biarritz, or Nice; but—well, here we are at Stonebrook instead, and it suits Emma pretty well."

"You have seen my mother, of course?"

"Oh yes, she has been to call on us." I was on the eve of adding—and we are to dine with you *en famille* on Christmas Day; but something inexplicable restrained me.

"She has only lately returned home, and I hope we shall often see you and Mrs. Hayes?"

I made no answer. I did not think his wish was at all likely to be realized.

"By the way, you saw Miss Chalgrove.

Do you know that you are curiously alike in appearance—only you are much the taller of the two? The resemblance struck me the first time I saw you; you might be sisters, or, at any rate cousins.”

“I have no sisters or cousins.”

“Oh, surely you must have cousins—even half a dozen. Why, I possess half a hundred.”

“If I have, I have never heard of them.”

“Do you mean to say that you have no relations?”

“None that I know of. My father had an only brother in the navy. He was drowned years ago, and he himself lived in India so long that he lost sight of all his connections.” (I did not mention my mother. Why should I tell him that she had been disowned by her family?) “I

had not seen my father since I was eight years old."

"Then I saw him, and knew him well, quite recently—knew him better than you did, if I may say so, Miss Hayes, for, of course, two men have more in common than a man and a little girl in pinafores. He was a rare good sort."

"Yes, I believe he was. I wish he was alive now with all my heart. It seems so hard that people in the prime of life are cut off, and old men and women who have lived their lives out, and are tired of existence, drag on wearily year after year."

"Yes, there's my poor father," said Mr. Somers; "his bodily health is good—it is the health of a young man—whilst his mind is dying."

I had heard of that, but felt it only polite to express sympathetic surprise.

“He was in a railway accident years ago, and it’s coming against him now. And how is Mrs. Hayes?” he inquired, rather abruptly.

“Pretty well.”

“I am coming to see her immediately—to-morrow—only it is a hunting day; but, perhaps, I can look in for a flying visit.”

“And was your expedition successful?” I asked.

“No, not a bit. The business part was a dead failure, and only throwing good money after bad; but, as you may have noticed, I’m not at all clever. I did my little best, and I could do no more. However, I enjoyed the trip, as a trip, extremely. There is the band again: shall we go and take a turn?”

“But I believe I am engaged to some one,” I answered, rising all the same.

“Pray, how can you tell? you have no program—no, not even a shirt-cuff!”

And thus persuaded, against my conscience, we began; but, before I had been twice round the room, I was claimed by Sir Fulke, and not alone Sir Fulke, but a little weather-beaten cavalry man, who was very positive that “this was *his* dance.”

As we stood disputing amicably, I was suddenly arrested by a higher power. Alas! poor Cinderella’s trivial triumph was over, her hour had come.

The Miss Bennys waylaid me with grave, determined faces, much to my companions’ disgust, and Miss Benny said in a very loud voice—

“Scott, the fly man, is waiting, Miss Hayes. We promised not to detain him after one o’clock; it is now half-past one. Therefore, if you are returning in *our*

charge, I must ask you to come home at *once*.”

“And my dance?” cried Mr. Aubrey Price.

“And mine?” echoed Sir Fulke.

There was no use in attempting to resist them—no time to take leave of my hostess: she was at supper. I was in the Miss Bennys’ clutches; they were inexorable. This was *their* moment of triumph, and I was carried away, followed to the very door of the fly by four eligible partners, uttering loud regrets.

Mr. Somers pressed my hand as he said good-by, and added, “I shall look forward to seeing you soon—in a day or two.”

“We need not ask if you have enjoyed yourself, Miss Hayes,” exclaimed the elder Miss Benny in an acrid key. “I admire your”—I thought perhaps she was going

to say dress or dancing, but it was my—
“wonderful self-confidence! Mrs. Cholmondeley seems to have *quite* taken you up! She is fond of doing that; she took a fancy to an Australian girl, she met on board ship, and actually brought her home, and had her with her, taking her everywhere for months. People called her the kangaroo; she was a horror.”

The tone implied, that I was a horror also,—if not actually a kangaroo. I burst out laughing. I laughed loud and long; I could not stop. I suppose I was almost hysterical. The reaction from the late brilliant scene, where I had been made much of, where I had danced and enjoyed the pleasures of this life for the very first time, where I had been conscious of whispered flattering comments, and eloquently flattering eyes, where I had sniffed a little of the intoxicating incense of ad-

miration, and felt that youth and beauty are a great power, was too much. Then to come down to being one of four in a close stuffy fly, to remember the dingy little bedroom in which I must shed my fine feathers—how seven-and-sixpence for my share of the conveyance would pinch my weekly purse, and that I had forgotten to buy bacon for the morrow's breakfast! All these thoughts and contrasts were jumbled up in my excited brain, and I laughed loud and long. My indecorous hilarity was succeeded by a freezing silence—a terrible, accusing, blank silence, which lasted the whole way home. For five long miles there was not a sound in that fly, save a sneeze or a yawn. The experience was appalling; it got upon my nerves. I felt inclined to sing or to scream. Luckily I controlled myself, or I should probably have been

delivered at the door of the lunatic asylum. At last we drove up to Mrs. Gabb's. I opened the door and sprang out, then I politely thanked the Miss Bennys for their escort, and wished them all a fair good night—which met with no response.

CHAPTER X.

“WHO *ARE* THESE CHALGROVES?”

I LET myself in with a latchkey—Mr. Gabb’s own particular key—and crept stealthily up-stairs, hoping that Emma was asleep, and that I could thus sneak past her door unheard; but no: she was evidently on the watch for my return, and called out to me to come into her room, desiring me to “turn up the lamp, take off my cloak, and tell her all about it!”

I obediently sat down on a low chair facing her, and began to describe everything to the best of my power; the drive, the arrival, the lovely old house, the crowds, the dresses, and how Mrs. Chol-

mondeley had singled me out and introduced me to partners.

“Your dress is almost as fresh as ever—that is one comfort. Was Lady Hildegard present?” inquired Emma anxiously.

“No, only Lady Polexfen. She did not notice me. But Mr. Somers was also there. He fulfilled your fondest hopes—he ‘noticed me’ a good deal.”

“What do you mean, Gwen?”

“I mean that he danced with me three or four times, took me in to supper, and finally put me into the fly.”

“That was very kind of him. Just like him!”

“Oh, I had plenty of partners. I was not at all an object of charity, I can assure you! Mr. Somers asked for you, and said he was coming to see you immediately, and oh, Emma, I had such a curious ex-

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perience! I met a girl to-night who might be my own sister, we are so much alike. She remarked the resemblance too, and Mr. Somers said that it struck him the first time he ever met me.”

“And who was she?”

“A Miss Chalgrove; the Honorable Dolly Chalgrove.”

I noticed that Emma gave a little start.

“My mother’s name was Chalgrove. This girl and I are so much alike that we might be cousins. She is so bright and animated and fascinating, that I took a fancy to her on the spot. I *wish* she was my cousin. It is really too bad that I have no relatives, not a single cousin, and Mr. Somers has fifty!”

“I dare say you have fifty third or fourth cousins somewhere in the west of Ireland,” said Emma shading her face with her hand (and I noticed with a sharp

pang how thin and transparent that hand had become). “ But it would take a lifetime to discover them, and probably they would not repay the trouble. Your father was not anxious to claim them. After his mother’s and his brother’s death, some ‘cousin’ took advantage of his absence abroad to claim the little property that was his by right. He might have gone to law, but he would not. It would have brought him home, and cost him another fortune.”

“ Well, but, Emma, what about my mother’s relations ? ”

“ They were a forbidden topic—a dead letter. Your father could not bear their name mentioned. They were very grand people, who expected their only daughter to make a brilliant match, instead of running away with a penniless army doctor—they never acknowledged her, never for-

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gave her, no, never noticed her, no more than if she had ceased to exist. She fretted a good deal when she was in poor health. She wrote, and they returned the letter unopened. Your father, easy-going man as he was, resented this to the end of his days; and when he received a letter after *her* death, he treated it in the same fashion—returned it as it came.”

“But all this time, who *are* these Chalgroves? Please tell me, Emma, for of course you know.”

“Yes; but your father did not wish *you* to know. However, circumstances alter cases. He never dreamt that you would be left almost homeless and friendless, instead of living under his own roof, surrounded with every comfort and pleasure his love could give you.”

“Yes, of course, I know all that—I am

confident of that ; but, once more, about the Chalgroves ? ”

“ I will tell you another time—to-morrow——”

“ No, no ; now. Please, please ; it won't take you five minutes, and I shall not rest or sleep till you satisfy me.”

“ I can tell you very little, dear. Your father was extremely reticent on this one subject ; but I believe that he and your mother met at a fancy ball. It was a case of love at first sight on both sides. Her people would not hear of it. She was extremely pretty, charming, and young, and they expected her to make a splendid match. They hurried her away to a distant country place, but it was all of no use ; and when she heard that he was going to India she insisted on accompanying him, and she ran away and they were married in London. I believe

she made an attempt to see her people and say farewell before she sailed, but they refused to receive her, and sent out a message, ‘Not at home.’ She did not want anything from them, only to say good-by. They were furious, and never forgave her; her father was inflexible. He and her mother are dead long ago. Her brother is Lord Chalgrove.”

“I saw him to-night,” I broke in; “he looked so hard at me!—I suppose he noticed the likeness. And he is my uncle, and that nice girl is my first cousin. How strange!”

“Yes. How strange that you should come across them here! They live in Northamptonshire, where they have a lovely old place called The Chase. Your mother was the Honorable Gwendoline Chalgrove, but she dropped the prefix altogether when she married, so I was told

by people at Jam-Jam-More. She was a most graceful, elegant creature, a splendid horsewoman, but as ignorant of the value of money, or of housekeeping, as an infant—as, indeed, I might say, myself! Your father was devoted to her memory, and I was never one bit jealous. Her memory was dear to me, too, though I never saw her. There was something so touching and so romantic about her life—a delicate girl brought up in luxury, abandoning everything for love, and fading away like a fragile flower in an uncongenial climate!

“Your father used to go and look at her grave every Sunday morning. Over it there stood a white cross, and just the one word ‘Gwendoline.’ He kept all her little belongings under lock and key, in a leather despatch-box—her Prayer-book, sketches, and letters (I gave you her little trinkets); they are all in the big

bullock trunk down-stairs, along with your father's books and clothes. I've never had the heart to open it. Mrs. Gabb keeps it in the back hall. Would you like to examine it?”

“Yes, I should very much.”

“And these people that you met to-night—it was certainly a wonderful chance your coming across them. I am so glad you wore your white satin, darling. Perhaps your uncle may make inquiries, and find out who you are. Of course, the first advances—any advances—must come from *them*.”

“Of course!” I assented emphatically.

“You may suppose that it was a delicate question for me to meddle with—a *second* wife; but once or twice I did venture to say that it was a pity to lose sight of the Chalgroves, on your account. Your father never would hear me out; you

were never to know them. The topic was his Bluebeard's closet, and I dared not open it."

"I don't wonder."

"Oh, you must not be like him. I have heard that the present lord is a simple, unaffected, homely man. He may discover you—why not?—from the likeness, if he even heard your name."

And she pushed back her hair, and sat up in bed, her eyes blazing with excitement. An alluring vision was before them as she spoke. She already beheld me comfortably installed in Chalgrove Chase! Oh, I knew her *so* well!

"You have got an idea into your head," I said, "and please, please, chase it out immediately. Lord Chalgrove will never seek me out; he does not know of my existence. He was probably surprised to see that an ordinary young woman had

been endowed with the family type of feature. He will never give me another thought, no more than if he saw a groom wearing a suit of clothes resembling the Chalgrove livery. His daughter, who is not at all conventional, actually addressed me, and asked how I came by the Chalgrove eyebrows."

"Oh, my dear Gwen! And what *did* you say?"

"What could I say?" I answered, rising. "I said nothing. 'How does one say nothing?' To you I say, at last. 'Good night.'" And, stooping down, I kissed her, and, gathering up my various accouterments, departed, and crept up to my own room.

But I did not go to bed immediately. I sat brushing my long fair locks, and slowly reviewing all the events of this remarkable evening.

Between intervals of hair-brushing, I studied the Chalgrove brows and upper lip that confronted me in that miserable looking-glass. The eyebrows were slightly arched, finely penciled, and quite black. The Chalgrove lip was short, and a little—well, if not scornful—haughty. And it was a lying lip: for, as far as one is permitted to know one's self, I was neither.

The clock was striking three when I crept into bed, and fell asleep almost as my head touched the pillow, and enjoyed unusually interesting dreams.

The next morning a brace of pheasants and a huge bouquet of violets were left at the hall door, with Mr. Everard Somers' compliments for Mrs. Hayes.

We went to tea at the rectory that afternoon. I took my guitar, by request, and played and sang. I was becoming quite a society girl! I wore a smart toque—

made by my own hands—and a bunch of violets, and received an unusual share of the conversation. The fame of my *début* had been noised abroad; one girl asked me where I got my guitar ribbons; another, where I got my toque; a third, where I had obtained the lovely violets, and who was my dressmaker?

“I hear your daughter looked quite nice last night,” said Mrs. Blunt (our rector’s wife), affably.

“Nonsense, mother,” said her well-named daughter. “We were told she was the beauty of the evening, the cynosure of all eyes, and I’m sure I am not surprised.”

When we returned home it was late, and we were sorry to find that Mr. Somers had called: his card lay on the table.

Mrs. Gabb hurried up after us to explain.

"I thought as how you were in, Mrs. Hayes, so I asked him up, and he sat and waited for over half an hour. He wrote a bit of a note. It's there in the blotter." And there it was :

"So sorry not to find you at home. I am off to town the day after Christmas for a short time. Hope to see you when I return.

"E. S."

CHAPTER XI.

MRS. MOUND'S OPINION.

ON Christmas morning, Emma complained of a cold and a sharp pain in her chest. She did not venture to church, as it was a bitterly bleak day, but nursed herself up for the evening, declaring that in a snug brougham, with furs and a foot-warmer, she could brave Greenland itself. Mrs. Gabb and family were also spending the evening abroad.

“Hearing as you was dining and sleeping at the Abbey, ma’am, I take the liberty of leaving you,” she explained. (It was not the first liberty she had taken.) “I’ll have everything ready—candles and coal

and hot-water—to last till half-past seven. We—Gabb and me and the children and Annie—are invited to my sister's for six o'clock, and she lives a good bit the other side of the town. But, if it will inconvenience you, I'll leave Annie to help you to dress, or anything."

"No, no ; not on any account." Emma assured her that we could manage perfectly. "Please do not trouble about us," she added, "but just see to the lights and fire. We will turn down the lamp before we leave."

"There is nothing in the house for breakfast. But I suppose it won't be required. You won't be back till late in the forenoon?"

To which Emma smilingly assented.

As Emma believed that this festivity would be merely the forerunner of many, she took great pains with my dress, was

most fastidious about the arrangement of my hair and the fit of my gloves, and put a finishing touch to my toilet in the shape of a curious old native necklet, made of amethysts and real pearls.

At last we were ready—all save our cloaks. Emma looked wonderfully pretty—her color was so brilliant, her eyes shone—the light of other days was in her face. Excitement and anticipation had thrown her into a fever of restlessness ; it seemed to her active brain that so very much—in fact, all my future—was to hinge upon this eventful evening. If Lady Hildegarde (who was devoted to young people, and extremely fond of society) took a fancy to me, the thing was done—I was launched. If not, there was, I'm sure she firmly believed, an end of everything. I was doomed, and for life, to social extinction and obscurity.

We sat waiting, with merely the blinds down, so that we could easily scan the street. It was a bright moonlight night, and there was a sharp frost. The lamp was sputtering and blinking and making itself extremely unpleasant for lack of wick.

"We will turn it out," I said, "and light the candles. There are only two small bits, but the carriage will be here immediately—in fact, I hear it now."

Yes, a pair of horses, trotting briskly up the hard-frozen street. No; they went past.

"It is Lady Bloss," said Emma, pulling up the blind and actually opening the window; "she is dining at the Cholmondeleys'. But I hear another coming. Ah, it's only a dog-cart!"

"*Do* shut the window!" I implored; but I spoke to deaf ears.

There were wheels in the distance—a

long way off—and I was not to worry, but to put on my cloak at once.

Five minutes elapsed—ten minutes. I rose and pulled down the window without apology. A quarter of an hour!

“Yes,” cried Emma, half-hysterically; “the carriage is rather late, but I really hear it now. It is coming at last!”

But, no; it was merely Mound the undertaker, and family, in his own best mourning coach. Then Emma's little traveling-clock chimed out eight silvery strokes.

“And they dine at eight!” said Emma, under her breath. “Perhaps it was half-past,” she said. “Can the coachman have made a mistake?” And she looked at me with—oh, such a piteous, wistful, eager pair of eyes.

I made no reply. I dared not put my opinion into plain, brutal words, and tell the white-faced, anxious little inquirer,

that " her friend Lady Hildegarde had forgotten us ! " The fire had died down. The candles were expiring in their sockets. We sat together in absolute silence. Oh, if I live to be a hundred, I shall never forget the heartache I endured that miserable half-hour—not for myself, but for Emma.

At last she said, in a husky whisper—

" Gwen, Gwen ! Are you asleep ? "

" No. "

" Is it possible that she has forgotten us ? "

" I'm afraid so, " I whispered.

" Oh no, she couldn't. Christmas Day, too, and our places at table ! *That* would remind her—two places short. Or, could it be possible?—she was always rather heedless—yes "—now coming over to me, and looking at me with a haggard, white face—" you are right, she must have forgotten all about us. And she spent

Christmas with me in my palmy days, and said—oh, what is the good of recalling it all now? Here are we two, on Christmas night, desolate and alone, without dinner or fire, and soon we shall be in outer darkness”—pointing to the candle. “Oh, it is too, *too* cruel”—and she burst into tears. “I had built on it so,” she sobbed—“this little visit, not for myself, but for you; I thought she would ask you to stay, and befriend you perhaps—when—when——”

“Never mind about me, darling,” I said kneeling down beside her, “she is a hard, selfish, worldly woman. I saw through her long ago. We bored her fearfully. She did not want us here. She was afraid we might become an incubus, because we are poor. She asked us in a spasm of shame at her own conduct, and on the impulse of the moment. Don’t cry—don’t,

dearest! We must make the best of it. Oh, how cold the room is! I'll take off my gown, and hunt up some chips and light a good fire, and go and see if I can't find something to eat. I wonder where the matches are?"

In a very short time I had changed my dress and made a trip to the lower regions. Here I found some bits of coal and chips, the heel of a loaf, and, about a pint of skim-milk.

"Oh, Gwen dear," gasped Emma, as I re-entered, "I must go to bed, I feel *so* ill. I've been fighting against it all day; but now there is a pain in my chest, just like a sword being run into it."

And Emma stood up, and clutched hold of the chimney-piece, and turned on me a face gray and drawn with mortal suffering.

I was naturally greatly alarmed. I

hurried her into her room, undressed her, and put her to bed.

“ I’m so cold—oh, *so* cold ! ” she moaned; and so she was. But, alas, there was no fire, no hot water, no anything ! I was at my wits’ end ; then I suddenly bethought me of Mrs. Mound. I knew she was at home, and ran across to the little private door. After a very short interval, and as soon as I had breathlessly explained my troubles, Mrs. Mound (good, kind soul !) came over bearing a kettle of ho water, some mustard, and a lamp. She had despatched her eldest son to fetch Dr. Skuce without a moment’s delay.

“ Your mother taken ill, and you all alone ! ” she said. “ Dear, dear, dear ! it’s terrible indeed ! I’ll just fill a hot bottle and take it in, and have a look at her.”

Emma lay on her little bed, moaning

and gasping in the grip of a great agony.

“ You’ll be all right soon, ma’am. I’ll light a nice little fire, and get you a warm drink ; and I have sent one of my boys for Skuce.”

She spoke to us both in the same cheerful and encouraging manner ; but I heard her distinctly talking to her husband over the balustrades. What she said was evidently not for my ear, and nearly turned me to stone.

“ It’s a bad business, Isaac. The poor little thing is past Skuce or any one. There will be a job for *you* here, before many days are over. I’ve seen pneumonia before—she has got it as bad as can be. Nothing can save her—I knew that, the moment I saw her face. Poor lady, she will be gone before the New Year ! ”

CHAPTER XII.

“INDIAN PAPERS, PLEASE COPY.”

ALL that miserable Christmas night Emma was desperately ill. The little lodging-house was in an uproar, and Mrs. Gabb was unmistakably annoyed at the prospect of having an invalid on her hands. Of course I undertook all the nursing, wrung out hot stupes, dressed blisters, administered draughts, and towards morning the patient fell asleep.

About twelve o'clock, when I chanced to go into our sitting-room, I discovered that it was already in possession of Miss Skuce, who was walking up and down like some caged animal.

"So your mother is ill?" she began abruptly.

"Very ill, I am afraid. It was kind of you to come so soon to ask for her."

"And you never went to the Abbey, after all! The curate was there—I have just seen him—and he said there were no empty places, nor *one* word about you. How was that?" she demanded, as she paused and glared at me.

"Please speak in a low voice," I said, "the walls are so thin, and Emma is not deaf. The truth was, that Lady Hildegard forgot us altogether."

"Tell me honestly, Miss Hayes, *did* she ever ask you? I'd like to see her note."

"You know, we told you that it was a verbal invitation. We were ready to start at half-past seven. We allowed Mrs. Gabb to leave us alone in the house. There was, of course, no dinner, no food,

no fire, no lights; and there we sat famishing! My stepmother, who had been ailing all day, became seriously ill. She has fallen asleep now, after a very bad night, and must on no account be disturbed.”

“It’s most extraordinary: and her ladyship never even missed you. And now she has gone off to Brighton for a week.”

“Well, it is quite immaterial to *me*. I never wish to see her again,” I rejoined in an emphatic whisper.

“It certainly *is* most mortifying,” said Miss Skuce, seating herself in Emma’s chair, and stretching out her goloshed feet. “To be asked to the Abbey, and to puff the news everywhere—and then to be forgotten! I had some eggs here; but, as your mother is ill, I won’t leave them.”

“No, pray don’t, on any account.”

“The Chalgroves have left the Moate, gone home, and nothing settled about the match. Young Somers is a fool. There is a rumor that he is in love with some wretched girl who hasn’t a penny, and Lady Hildegarde is nearly beside herself! Lady Polexfen told Captain Blackjohn, and he told young Ferrars, who told his mother, who told *me*. By the way, Lady Polexfen—Maude, you know—is making herself the talk of the place, the way she is flirting with Captain Blackjohn. However, I’m forgetting that you are not Mrs. Hayes; we should not talk gossip to girls. Well, I must be going. I hope your mother will be better to-morrow; good-by. Oh, by the way, I quite forgot to wish you the compliments of the season, and all the usual sort of thing. *I* don’t believe in a merry Christmas.”

"Neither do I," I answered with all my heart.

"Well, good-by, good-by," and seizing the eggs, she trotted downstairs.

The next day, Emma was much worse.

"Gwen," she gasped in a weak voice, "I am going to leave you; and oh, I am so miserable about you! My pension dies with me. We have barely what will pay our bills in hand. There is my watch, and some ornaments; they will pay for—for the funeral—and—a——"

"Oh, don't!" I sobbed. "You are going to get well. You must and shall get well."

"You have only eleven pounds a year, Gwen,—oh, my poor, poor Gwen, what *will* you do? Oh, if your father and I could only have seen the future! And I have no friends! If it was next year, the Grahams and Murrays would be home. If only Lady Hildegarde——"

“Don’t mention her name,” I cried passionately. “And don’t trouble about me, darling. I shall manage. Think of nothing but yourself, and of getting well. You will, won’t you?”

“No; I’ve felt this coming for a long time. I am consumptive. The chill—oh! oh! this pain——”

“There, there! you shall not talk any more.”

“Oh, I must speak while I can—and I’m not afraid to go, Gwen. Why should I shrink from what all our beloved ones have passed through? Only for leaving you—dearest—dearest Gwen,” and her voice died away. I sat for a long time, holding her clammy hand in mine. “If the Chalgroves only knew!” she panted out.

I was silent. As far as I was concerned, they should never know, nor would I ever

lift a finger to summon my grand relatives.

Her mind wandered a good deal. There were disjointed scraps of sentences, of songs, of prayers, and something about Lady Hildegarde and a merry Christmas ; and I could not understand whether she was rambling or not, as she said—

“A happy new year, Gwen, and many of them.”

After this she sank into a stupor, from which she never awoke, and gasped away her life at that fatal hour before dawn when so many souls are summoned. Now I was indeed alone. I cried a little—not nearly as much as Mrs. Gabb. I was thankful that there was an end to Emma’s terrible sufferings ; but I felt in a sort of stupor myself—my brain seemed sodden. I had not slept nor taken off my clothes for three days. Mrs. Gabb was

very kind, so were Mrs. Mound, the Doctor, and even Miss Skuce—but she was also terribly inquisitive.

The funeral was small, indeed, it could scarcely have been smaller. Dr. Skuce and I followed in the only mourning-coach. The cemetery was on a hillside, quite a mile from Stonebrook, and it was a bright springlike morning—a day that December had stolen from May, and that May would filch from December in turn—as we proceeded at a foot pace on our mournful errand.

There was a meet in the neighborhood; numbers of red-coated fox hunters trotted past on their hunters. One drew up for a moment to a walk, and lifted his hat as he went by. It was Mr. Somers. His scarlet coat, his bright handsome face, his spirited hunter, which he reined in with great difficulty—what a painful contrast

this picture afforded to that of myself—veiled, and shrinking into the corner of a dingy mourning-coach—following my only friend to her grave.

Little did Mr. Somers suspect, as he dashed onward, that he had been showing a last token of respect to Emma Hayes.

After the funeral, I had to face the world. Poor people cannot afford an extended period of retirement and mourning. I made my black gown, and as I sewed, I made plans. I had nearly twenty pounds. I had youth, health. I would go to London and work for my bread like other girls. But how? I could teach French. I could sew and embroider beautifully. No, I would not be a nursery governess, a *bonne d'enfants*. I could play the guitar and sing. I had a fine mezzo-soprano, and had been well taught.

My singing had been in requisition at the rectory tea-parties and in the church choir; but it would not bring me in a pennyworth of bread. I must leave Stonebrook; I saw no means of earning my living there, and I detested the place for many reasons. It was evidently well known that I had been left almost penniless. The rector and his wife had called; they had been very sympathetic, and had inquired as to my future plans; but they could not give me much beyond their sympathy. They had a large grown-up family, and but narrow means. Mrs. Cholmondeley was a victim to influenza, and extremely ill. The Blosses and Bennys had left cards, and this, with the exception of Miss Skuce, brought me to the end of my acquaintances. The mere fact of thinking of her appeared to have summoned her to my presence! There

she was, shaking her damp waterproof on the landing ; it was a dreary, drizzling January afternoon.

“ Do you know that you have never put it in the papers ? ” she began, without preamble. “ I thought Mound would have seen to *that*. It ought to be done at once.”

“ Yes, of course ; and I have been extremely remiss,” I acknowledged, with dismay.

“ I will write it out and send it to the *Times* for you,” producing a pencil—“ the *Times* and the *Stonebrook Star*. What shall I say ? ”

After thinking a moment, I said—

“ ‘ December 27th, at Stonebrook, of acute pneumonia, Emma, widow of the late Desmond Hayes, Esq., L. C. S., M. D., of Jam-Jam-More, aged thirty-three. Indian papers, please copy.’ ”

“Very well. Now give me five and sixpence, and I will send it off by the next post,” returned Miss Skuce, when she had ceased to scribble. “And so I hear you are leaving!—Mrs. Gabb says you have given her notice.”

“Yes, I am going away very shortly to London.”

“Well, I think it is an extremely wise move. There is no opening here for a governess or companion; every one that I know is suited. I am very sorry for you, and for poor Mrs. Hayes; but I always felt that she was not long for this world. She was subject to delusions, wasn’t she, poor dear? That was all a delusion about Lady Hildegarde! Of course, other people call it by a nastier name; but *I* don’t!”

“What do you mean?” I demanded indignantly.

“That the dear good soul imagined she knew Lady Hildegarde! But no one ever saw her ladyship here, and you were not present at the dinner. The invitation and acquaintance were in her imagination. I am aware that Mr. Somers has sent game and flowers, and called; but gentlemen’s attentions are on a totally different footing from those of the ladies of a family, and it is quite incredible that his mother, Lady Hildegarde, would stay for weeks as guest under a person’s roof, that she would be nursed and tended like a sister, and absolutely ignore the same kind friend when she came to live near her, and was in very poor circumstances. It is impossible! As for her photographs, they were bought in London. The Bennys *always* said so!”

“Miss Skuce!” I paused, and then added in a calmer tone, “It is not worth

while debating the question. If you think we are impostors, I cannot help it; but every word that my stepmother said was *true!*”

“Why!” cried my visitor, stretching out her neck and craning forward, “here is Lady Hildegarde, I declare, and getting out! Maude Polexfen is in the carriage. Her ladyship is coming in—in here.”

“I shall not receive her,” I answered, rushing to the bell, but remembering, as I tore at it, that it was broken. In another minute Lady Hildegarde was in the room, swimming towards me with beautifully gloved extended hands.

“Oh, my poor dear child! *What* news is this? Is it true about Mrs. Hayes?”

“If you mean that she is dead—yes,” I answered, still standing up, but making no effort to salute her.

“How frightfully sudden!” dropping

her hands to her sides and sinking into Emma's chair. “What was it?—nothing infectious, I trust?”

“No, nothing infectious.”

“Oh,” with a cool little nod, “how do you do, Miss Skuce? Pray” (to me) “tell me all particulars. My son only heard the sad news last evening. He was greatly shocked; and he despatched me at once, as you see!”—Evidently she was not a little proud of her promptitude and condescension.

“She caught a severe cold on Christmas Day—” I began.

“Oh, by the way, I'm *so* sorry; I forgot all about sending for you—never thought of it *once*—actually not till my son brought me the melancholy intelligence last night. He wanted me to come off here then and there. I am so very sorry!”

“ You may well be sorry,” I answered, unable any longer to retain my attitude of frigid politeness, “ for your negligence indirectly caused my mother’s death. Yes ; she was so confident that you meant your invitation, that she allowed the people of the house to leave us, and here we sat that bitter night—perhaps you can remember the temperature—without fire or food, waiting for you to send for us. She would not believe that you could forget her ; she thought so much of you—she was so genuine and affectionate. Miss Skuce, here, has been telling me that my mother suffered from delusions—that you never knew her in India. Did you ? ”

“ Why, of course I did,” with a petulant gesture.

“ And you stayed with her—for weeks.”

“Yes ; I never denied it, that I am aware of ! ”

“And were nursed by her through a serious illness ? Is this true, or was it a delusion ? ”

“My good young person ! pray don't be so excited. I am not accustomed to be brow-beaten in this fashion. You need not look at me as if I were a reptile ! Come, I am a very busy woman ; I have many claims on my time and my society. I am overrun, and apt to be a little forgetful ; and I admit that, with respect to your stepmother, I have been rather slack. However, I always meant to be friendly—I shall make it up to you. I am aware that you are left totally destitute, and I know of a most excellent post which I can secure for you at once, as companion to a lady in New Zealand. I shall be happy to exert myself and get

you this situation without delay, and I promise——”

“Pray do not trouble yourself about me,” I broke in. “I have no faith in your promises—or in you!”

Here Lady Hildegarde rose very slowly to her feet, and vainly endeavored to overawe me by her look, and cover indignation with dignity.

“You forget yourself, Miss Hayes,” she said in a freezing tone.

But I was now at bay, and replied—

“If you will be so good as to exert yourself so far as to forget *me*, I shall be extremely glad.”

And then I held the door wide open, and, though my knees were shaking under me, I bowed her out. Turned out Lady Hildegarde! Oh, what a tale for the town! Miss Skuce, who had shrunk up into a corner, enjoyed the scene pro-

digiously, I am certain, though she felt it her duty to remonstrate most strongly with me.

“I apologize for all I said, for I have now her ladyship’s own words for her obligations to your stepmother, and I apologize to *her* memory. She was a dear, sweet, ladylike creature! She would never have reproached Lady Hildegarde, nor flown at her like you. Oh, I shall never forget the look of you! Nor how you dashed her offer in her face, and drove her out of the room. You should have pocketed your pride and taken her reference—a titled reference. You forget that you should order yourself lowly and reverently to all your betters.”

“Do you call that mean, selfish, ungrateful woman my better?”

“Of course I do!” with emphasis.

“There is no question of *that*! Fancy

comparing yourself to the daughter of a duke! I think you behaved in a most vulgar, insulting, outrageous manner. You should——”

“Have played the hypocrite?” I suggested sarcastically.

“Well, well, I’ve no time to argue, for I must be going; but, mark my words, your high temper will bring you very low yet, as sure as my name is Sophia Ann Skuce.” Exit.

CHAPTER XIII.

KIND INQUIRIES.

“So you’ll be going this day week?” remarked Mrs. Gabb, as she bustled in with the lamp. “And I’m sure I can’t wonder; it’s lonely-like for you being here in this room by yourself, and London is where most people goes to—it sort of sucks ’em in.”

“Yes; people who have to earn their bread have a better chance of doing so in London.”

“You’ll go in for governessing, I suppose?”

“No. I’m afraid I am not sufficiently accomplished.”

“Laws! I should have thought you was. But it’s a hard life, and poor pay, and often bad usage. And you do sing beautiful. Your voice sort of gives me a lump in my throat, and many’s the night Gabb and I, and sometimes a friend or two, have stood on the stairs, and listened to you a-playing and singing to that guitar. I’m sure you’d take splendidly at one of the music ’alls, if you could only dance a bit! Stop; what’s that, now? There’s a knock at the door, and the girl’s out.” And she rushed down-stairs, and in a very few seconds I was astonished to hear a manly foot in the passage, and she ushered in “Mr. Somers.”

He looked rather embarrassed, and very grave; whilst I, though almost speechless with surprise, was collected enough as I put down my sewing and rose to meet him.

“Miss Hayes, I hope you will pardon me,” he said, “for intruding on you at this hour and in this way ; but I felt that *writing* would be useless, and that I must see you face to face. I am sure I need not tell you how much I feel for your loss, nor how shocked I was to hear of Mrs. Hayes’s death. I believe I actually passed her funeral, when I imagined her to be alive and well.”

“Yes, you did. Won’t you sit down ? ”
I said.

“We only heard the news last night. I was in hopes that my mother would have brought you back with her in the carriage to-day, *insisted* on your accompanying her. I told her she must take *no* refusal, but—but ”—and he hesitated, and his eyes fell from mine—“I am greatly distressed to learn that you and she have had a most unfortunate mis-

understanding—*only* a misunderstanding—it cannot be more. I know you both. I know my mother; she is absolutely incapable of giving offense; and I trust that I may say that I know you too.”

“You may, if you please. But sometimes I don’t know myself,” I answered recklessly.

“Perhaps you were *not* yourself to-day. I did not hear what occurred, only this, that my mother returned without you, and she assured me that you absolutely refused to receive any kindness at her hands.”

What garbled story had she laid before him? Should I tell him the truth? No; it would humiliate him, and he had always been most loyal to us.

“Is this correct?” he inquired, in a low voice.

“Yes. I need not enter into un-

pleasant details, for Lady Hildegarde is your mother. But she has hurt my feelings most deeply."

"I'm afraid she has an unfortunate manner sometimes; but she means well. She has had a lot of trouble lately. My father has been ailing for a long time, and we have been most unlucky in some money matters, and she is worried and perhaps a little brusque and sharp. I wish you understood one another."

We understood one another to admiration. I was keenly alive to Lady Hildegarde's family politics: how it was absolutely necessary that this young man—her son, so eagerly making her excuses to me—was bound, by every family law, to marry his cousin (and my cousin), Dolly Chalgrove—the marriage meant mental ease, suitability, prosperity, fortune. A marriage with me, which she bitterly but

needlessly dreaded, meant a miserable, poverty-stricken *mésalliance*. Yes ; I acknowledge that. It was a notorious fact that Mr. Somers was not a squire of dames. Lady Polexfen had magnified his attentions to me. Hence her coldness and neglect of Emma, her eagerness to transport me to the Colonies, her lies to her son, and her stern determination to keep us apart—wide apart.

“And so you will not accept my mother’s friendship ? ” he pursued.

I shook my head with an emphasis that was some relief to my feelings, although it was not an act of courtesy to my visitor.

“Well,” and he rose as he spoke, a very tall figure in our little low room, “you surely will not taboo *me*, Miss Hayes ? ” he asked appealingly. “I received great kindnesses, without *question*,

from your father and mother. I knew your father better than you did yourself. You have told me that you have no relatives in this country."

"None that I know," I quibbled, "or that know of me."

"Yes; you said so. Now, I hope you won't think I am taking an awful liberty if I ask you what are your plans?"

"On the contrary, it is very kind of you to inquire. I am going to London in a few days, back to our old lodgings. I shall then look about for something to do. I should not care to be a nursery governess, nor, as my landlady suggests, sing and dance at a music-hall."

"A music-hall!" His elbow swept a little saucer crash into the fender—he was too big for our room. "The woman must be mad!"

"Yes; she confesses that she has often

listened outside on the landing when I played my guitar and sang, and thinks I would 'take,' as she calls it."

"But——"

"But you need not be at all alarmed. I shall find some post, perhaps as clerk—I am clever at figures—perhaps as secretary. Mr. Blunt, the rector, will give me a character. I have only myself to please—no one's wishes to consult."

As I spoke, he had been fingering the little ornaments on the chimney-piece, with his head half turned away. Then he suddenly confronted me, and said—

"Miss Hayes, I hope what I am going to say will not startle you very much."

I became cold all over, and my heart beat fast. Was he going to offer me money? I laid down my work to conceal my trembling hands, and looked up in his face.

“You will make me very happy if you will marry me.”

I sat for a moment speechless ; then I also rose to my feet, and said in a low voice—I could not get it to sound, somehow—

“You cannot be in earnest, Mr. Somers.”

“I am in earnest—in deadly earnest, Miss Hayes.”

“You have seen me five times.”

“And every time I met you I have liked you better than the last. It began that day at the Stores. I am not a bit susceptible. I never felt drawn to any one in such a way. I have met heaps and heaps of girls, nice ones too and pretty, and gone away and forgotten them in half a day ; but you I never forgot. Your memory, your face, came all the way with me out to South America, came back with

me ; and when I saw you sweeping down the stairs at the Moate that night, I said to myself, ' Here she comes—*my fate !* ' My poor old governor has made an awful muddle of our affairs, and we are dreadfully hard up ; but I can take one of the farms, and work it myself." He paused suddenly, and looked at me expectantly.

" Mr. Somers," I began, " you have—I have—" Then in a sudden burst the words came—" What you ask is impossible."

" Why ? " he questioned softly.

" There is Miss Chalgrove," I replied, still more softly.

" Oh, *that* old story ! " with a shrug. " It would be an ideal match from the parents' point of view, to combine the title and property with the money ; but *we* have to be considered. Thank God,

we are not crowned heads, who must only consult the welfare of the State. In the first place, my cousin Dolly does not care a straw about me. I am her cousin, comrade, and old friend. She would not marry me for anything. She says she knows me too well ; it would be extremely uninteresting and monotonous ! Then, I would not marry her ; she is a very good fellow, but too much of a handful for any man. She has been riding a brute of a horse in the teeth of every one of her relations, male and female, and I heard to-day that he has given her rather a nasty fall, and she says it's nothing ; but she is so plucky, she always makes light of everything that happens to herself. Well, you see, Miss Chalgrove is no obstacle."

"No, but there is Lady Hildegarde. If I were to marry you, I should only add to her troubles, and possibly she to mine.

You cannot say that your mother would approve of your engagement to a girl you have only met five times, and who is both penniless and friendless ? ”

He made no immediate answer to this difficult question, and I added—

“ She and I do not love one another.”

“ But if you love me, Gwendoline, that is the main question. God knows, I love you ! ”

“ You pity me, I am sure ; and pity——”

“ No, I don’t,” he broke in impetuously, “ not in that sense, and I don’t believe in that fusty old saying.”

“ And you know nothing about me. You have seen so little of me,” I urged.

“ With regard to some people, a little goes a long way. Oh, good heavens, I don’t mean *that* ! ”

“ I don’t think you know what you mean,” I answered remorselessly.

“ Yes, I do ; but I am not quick and brilliant like you. I am doing my best to tell you that you are everything in the world to me—more than father, mother, money. I meant that the little I saw of you went a long way to making me care for you ; and you are laughing at my blunders, and raising objections. The real, true, and only obstacle is not Lady Hildegarde nor Miss Chalgrove, but Miss Hayes herself. She does not care a brass button about me—any fool can see that ! ”

He had actually worked himself into a passion.

“ You are wrong,” I replied gravely. “ The objections are insurmountable. I can never marry you ; but I do care for you, and I can promise you one thing—that I will never, never marry any one else——”

“ But me—”(seizing my hand before I was aware). “ Then, you will promise that, on your word of honor? ”

“ Yes ; I will never marry any one—but you.”

“ And when ? ”

“ When your mother asks me to be her daughter-in-law,” I whispered.

His face fell, and he hastily released me, as at this moment, without knock or cough, the door was flung open, and Miss Skuce burst into the room, with a newspaper in her hand.

“ Oh, *how* do you do, Mr. Somers? I had no idea you were here. Don’t you remember me? I’m Miss Skuce—Dr. Skuce’s sister; he attends the Abbey servants, you know.”

Mr. Somers—who looked very black indeed—merely bowed. Was Miss Skuce abashed? No, not a whit; though even

she must have seen that she was greatly *de trop*.

“So sorry to hear that Miss Chalgrove has met with an accident in the hunting-field. I saw it in the paper. How anxious *you* must be. I trust it’s not serious.”

“No, I believe not”—surveying her with cold curiosity.

“Well, it said that the horse fell on her”—sitting down, and apparently anxious to thresh out the subject at her leisure.

“Miss Hayes,” he said, turning to me, “I shall hope to see you again before you leave.”

He hesitated, reluctant to depart: he had so much to say to me! Then he shook hands, and, with an extremely cool bow to my visitor, walked out of the room. As the door closed after him, she jumped to her feet and cried—

“I saw him coming in. He has been

here fully twenty minutes! It's not at all *comme il faut* to be receiving men. I knew you would be dreadfully uncomfortable, and so I trotted over. He had no business to call on you. He is a most overbearing-looking young man, and I can't abide him! He always seems as if he didn't *see* me. What brought him? What did he want—eh?"

Oh, this woman—with her pitiless curiosity, her keen little questioning eyes, coming just after my late most trying interview—was quite insupportable! I could have stood up and screamed. I was overwrought, fagged, heartsore. I had had nothing to eat all day but a cup of tea and a slice of toast, for Lady Hildegard's pro-luncheon visit had effectually destroyed my appetite for my humble meal.

Still, I struggled for composure and forbearance, and offered a blank wall of im-

penetrability to Mrs. Gabb and Miss Skuce's storm of questions; for Mrs. Gabb had entered with the tea-tray, and a friendly determination to know "what brought young Mr. Somers at *that* hour of the night?"

"It is but barely five," I answered; "and he came to pay me a visit of condolence. He knew Mrs. Hayes very well in India."

"It's a most unusual thing," said Miss Skuce, suspiciously. "I wonder what his *mother* would say to it?"

At last I got rid of my pair of tormentors. They found that I was indisposed to be communicative. I pleaded (with truth) that I had a dreadful headache. So they departed together—to wonder, suggest, protest, and to discuss *me*, whilst I turned down the lamp, threw myself on the sofa, and cried comfortably for a couple of hours.

CHAPTER XIV.

“MISS HAYES, I BELIEVE?”

SURELY, there is no more melancholy task than collecting and putting away the belongings of the dead! Even such little everyday articles as gloves, pens, books, can inflict many agonizing stabs, however tenderly handled, ere they are thrust out of sight. Besides Emma's own particular possessions, I had to open and investigate the great bullock trunk which contained the remnant of my father's and mother's property; so that I was at the present time actually surrounded and invested by the effects of three relatives who had passed away, and by many

dumb and inanimate things, which nevertheless spoke with tongues.

The bullock trunk—being large and unwieldy—had been brought up to the drawing-room. I had given orders that no one was to be admitted. I had even locked the door, ere I turned the key in the trunk. It smelt strongly of camphor, and contained mostly my father's effects—his uniform, his pistols, books, some rare coins, several valuable daggers, several files of paid bills, and boxes of cartridges. Quite at the bottom was a good-sized leathern despatch-box, and a few pale water-color sketches, carefully wrapped in tissue-paper, and also a slender gold-mounted riding-whip and a broken fan. The despatch-box was full of letters—my father's and mother's letters. I glanced at one or two. Somehow, I shrank from reading them, from prying into the secrets,

the most sacred feelings of my dead parents. There was also an ivory Prayer-book, now very yellow, with the name, "Gwendoline Chalgrove," inscribed in a bold hand. There were, moreover, a faded photograph of a girl, a little baby's shirt, in which was stuck a rusty needle, and that was all.

These I put aside ; they were relics to be specially treasured. And then I repacked the great box (filling up the space with some of poor Emma's possessions), and sent it down-stairs. I had a great deal too many cases for a person of my indigent circumstances. My own paraphernalia was sufficiently modest, but I could not and would not abandon that great pile of luggage which had no living owners. I was going to London the next day. I had bidden good-by to the grave—paid our small accounts. I had packed

up all Emma's belongings. I was now busily putting together my own effects in my little room above the drawing-room: I do believe that one's clothes *swell* ! I was very hot and tired as I knelt on the floor stuffing mine into a choking trunk, when Mrs. Gabb came pounding up the stairs and gasped out as she opened the door, “ There's a gentleman below ! ” My mind of course, flew to Mr. Somers, and I made a gesture of dismissal. “ I can't see *any one*, ” I began.

“ He says he must see you ; and he— I couldn't well catch his name, but I believe he is *lord*. Here, just tidy yourself, and let me pick the white threads off you.”

I hurried down, with a very tumultuous heart, and discovered (as I had half suspected) Lord Chalgrove. The room was in the utmost confusion, and he was standing in the middle of it, with one of

the little water-color drawings in his hand, which he laid aside as I entered.

"Miss Hayes, I—I believe?" he asked, after a moment's hesitation.

"Yes; my name is Hayes."

"You are the daughter of Desmond Hayes and my sister Gwendoline?"

"I am," I acknowledge gravely.

"Then, my dear," he said, taking my hand in his, "I have come to take you home."

I gazed at him incredulously.

"You understand, don't you, that I am your uncle? Your mother was my only sister—you are my nearest of kin, except Dolly. You are the image of my poor Gwen!"

And this sedate little gray-bearded gentleman, whom I had never spoken to before, drew me nearer to him and kissed me timidly.

“How did you find me out?” I asked as he sat down beside me.

“I saw Mrs. Hayes’s death in the paper. I made inquiries from Grindlay and Co. her agents. There *was* a Miss Hayes, they believed—a stepdaughter—and I came by the first train. I am going to take you back with me to-day”—looking at his watch—“by the four o’clock train. We shall not be home before ten o’clock to-night. I see you are half packed.”

“Yes, I was going to-morrow.”

“Then I am just in the nick of time! I never knew of your existence, my dear, until this morning. I wish I had. There is no use in raking up old miseries now. My father and mother were stern and unforgiving—especially my father; and your mother had been everything to them—they were so proud of her. Well, she was headstrong. My Dolly is the

same. Your father was a singularly handsome and fascinating fellow. She walked out and married him one morning in St. James's Piccadilly; and my father, when he heard the news, drew the blinds down all over the house, and gave out that Gwen was *dead*. And then poor Gwen died within a year in real earnest. We heard that the baby died too; but I—I wished to make sure, and I wrote out to your father and made inquiries, and offered to receive the child, if it had survived, and he simply returned me my own letter. If I had known, it would have been different for you of late years. Your father was too proud. Pride cost a good deal, you see. It cost my father his daughter—well, well!”

“How is Miss Chalgrove? I heard she had met with an accident.”

“It's not much—a mere strain, she

says. Only for that, she would have accompanied me; but she has to lie still—a hard thing for her; and she is not Miss Chalgrove, but your cousin Dolly. She declares that she recognized you at a dance by your likeness to the family. I saw you too, and was struck by the same thing, but I thought it was accidental. Dolly tried to find out your name, and to get formally introduced to you, but she was told that you were a niece of some Miss Bennys, and that they had taken you away early in the evening. Then we returned home, and, almost immediately, she met with this horrible fall, and that put things out of her head until the other day, when some one wrote a letter and spoke of a pretty Miss Hayes, living here, having lost her stepmother. Then we saw the *Times* notice, and put two and two together, and here I am! Even if

your likeness to Gwen did not speak for you, I see her things about. That Prayer-book, there, I gave her myself. How was it that you never sent me a line?"

"I never heard anything about my mother's people until after that ball, when I told my stepmother of Miss Chalgrove's resemblance to myself. And then she told me all about my mother, and how my father would never hear the name of Chalgrove mentioned. He never dreamt that he would be leaving me alone in the world; and he was implacable on that one subject."

We talked for more than half an hour, my uncle and I. I felt as if I had known him for a long time. I told him all my circumstances; in short, told him everything—excepting about Mr. Somers.

"You know the Somers, perhaps?" he asked.

“Yes ; I—I—have met them.”

“They are connections of ours—of yours. Everard is my heir, as perhaps you may have heard, and a fine fellow. His father is my next-of-kin, but has completely lost his memory ; and Lady Hildegarde and I, though we know each other since we were in pinafores—well—we don’t stable our horses together.”

(Nor did Lady Hildegarde and I use the same stable !)

“I suppose I ought to drive out to the Abbey ; but it might run me for time, and we must go by the four o’clock train. May I ring for your landlady ? She can help you to put your things up. Some she can send after you ; and meanwhile I’ll go to the post-office and wire the news to Dolly.”

What a fuss Mrs. Gabb made ! She was far more in the way than otherwise.

However, in a very short time I had closed my gaping boxes, written directions, taken a dressing-bag, put on my hat and cloak, and was ready to start.

Miss Skuce entered as I was casting my last look round the sitting-room. (She had had her usual few words with Mrs. Gabb, and was almost incoherent.)

“ *Well, Gwendoline!* ”—a long pause, employed in staring at me very hard, as if she expected me to look different in some way—“ and so your uncle is ‘a lord,’ and has come to fetch you! Lord Chalgrove! Well, well, well! I congratulate you ”—kissing me effusively—“ I am quite broken-hearted that you are going.” She had never mentioned this before. “ And you will be a great lady—indeed, I am not one bit surprised—you always had the grand air,” and she held me back at arm’s length, and surveyed me, this time

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with undisguised admiration. “When you are living in high places, and driving in your coroneted carriage, you won’t forget your poor friends who were intimate with you” (far too intimate) “in your days of poverty and adversity?”

“No, no, Miss Skuce,” eager to escape, “I’ll *never* forget you—I can promise you that most faithfully.”

“Dear! You don’t mean to say that you have been over saying good-by to those horrid, common Mounds?”

“Certainly I have; they have been most kind to me. Why should I not take leave of them?”

“Well, I shall miss you frightfully. Living opposite to you has been as interesting as a tale in *The Family Reader* or *Bow Bells*. What with your coming so poor and lowly, and then knowing Lady Hildegarde, and turning the heads

of hundreds at the Moate ball—oh, / heard all about it—and then being left desolate, and scorned, and, lastly, being fetched away by a lord, your own *uncle*—why, it's most—most awfully affecting!" and she actually was so excited and upset that she began to cry.

In the midst of her sobs, my uncle reappeared, followed by a fly from the station. He gazed in puzzled bewilderment at Miss Skuce, who gasped out in jerky sentences—

"So sorry—to part—with this dear sweet girl—Lord Chalgrove. I am her *oldest* friend, too—as she will tell you. Known her—known her since she first came—a—stranger to Stonebrook."

"I am sure I am greatly obliged to you, ma'am. A kindness to my niece is a double kindness to me."

"Then," hastily drying her eyes, "will

you do me a favor, and allow me to come and see her off, your lordship?”

“Certainly; only too delighted,” handing her into the fly: Mrs. Gabb and family, Mrs. Mound and family, being assembled, and spectators of this most proud moment!

Then I took leave of them all, and of that dingy little house, where I had known many sorrows and but few joys; and was rattled off to the station at a great pace—my uncle being engaged all the time in listening to Miss Skuce’s voluble regrets.

It was a new experience to me to be waited upon; my uncle took all trouble off my hands. Whilst he was getting the tickets, I noticed the Abbey carriage drive up; it contained Lady Hildegarde and Lady Polexfen—who was evidently going away. They seemed surprised to see Lord

Chalgrove, and accosted him warmly. He said something in reply, and then both ladies turned and looked hard at *me*; but there was no time for further conversation, for our train was entering the station.

As my uncle joined me with tickets and newspapers, I said in a low voice, "Not in the same carriage with Lady Polexfen, please—*please!*"

Then I said farewell to Miss Skuce, who, sobbing hysterically, folded me in her arms; there was no use in struggling, but I promised myself that it would be for the last time. Much as I hated her endearments, they evidently afforded her sincere gratification.

As the clock pointed to four, we steamed slowly away, leaving her on the platform dissolved in tears, and Lady Hildegarde looking after us with a glare of stony incredulity.

CHAPTER XV.

A NEW STATION OF LIFE.

WE were met at Chalgrove station by the coroneted carriage and high-stepping horses, as foreseen by Miss Skuce's eager imagination. My scanty, shabby baggage was entirely the affair of a tall footman, who ushered me to this splendid equipage with an air of solemn deference, which afforded ample testimony that Lord Chalgrove's niece was *somebody*.

"I'm extremely anxious about Dolly," said my uncle as we bowled along at a rapid rate.

This was the third or fourth time, within three or four hours, that he had made the same remark.

"She won't give in—she has such a spirit—but I know she is more injured than we suspect, and that Dr. Harwood has rather a grave opinion of her case. An accident to the spine is always a serious matter."

"I should think it was," I assented. "But then, she has youth on her side, which is something."

"And she will have *you* by her side, which will be something," he replied. "It seems almost providential—*quite* providential, indeed—that I should have been able to lay claim to a relation, to a young companion for her, just at this critical time."

"Most providential for *me*, uncle, seeing that I have neither friends nor home."

"And here *is* your home now, my dear," he said, as we dashed between a pair of great stone pillars. "This is Chalgrove,

where your mother was born. There were only two of us, and we were always greatly attached to one another—and she was the leading spirit of the two, afraid of nothing not even of my father ; and many a scrape we got into together, though I was the elder by five years.”

Chalgrove Chase was a lovely place—not a new place in old clothes, nor an old place decked out in modern garments ; but a beautiful, dignified, venerable pile, standing among sloping green glades and fine forest trees. We entered through a hall or armory lined with coats of mail and feudal banners, and passed into a great gallery paneled with carved oak, and hung with impressive-looking portraits ; everything around me spoke of generations of magnificence, and of dignified prosperity. And I was, in a way, a daughter of this wealthy and ancient house !

The real daughter of the house received me with wide-open arms, as she lay upon a couch in her boudoir. Poor girl! even now I saw a sad change in her; her merry, dancing eyes looked anxious, and almost tragic; were they already deploring her blighted youth? Her lips were drawn with pain, her cheeks had lost their pretty contour. Yes, in ten days' time Dolly Chalgrove was wasted to a shadow!

Her spirits, however, were still in robust condition, and she hailed me with enthusiasm, and—what is more lasting—with warm and enduring affection.

“To tell you the truth, I don't care for many girls!” she confessed as I sat beside her, “and those who have been my chief pals have a horrid knack of getting married, and that puts an end to everything; because, once a girl marries, she tells all she hears to her husband, and even lets

him read her letters, and that three-cornered sort of business is most unsatisfactory. But now I have you, my own first cousin, who is the image of my Aunt Gwendoline, father says, and as I resemble her too, no wonder we are almost like sisters, and that I was drawn to you on the spot ! ”

“ And I to you,” I answered emphatically.

“ You remember that I told you to look out for me in the sporting papers ; but I never dreamt that when you did see me mentioned in a paragraph, it would be as the victim of a ‘ shocking accident in the hunting field.’ It was not really the horse’s fault, though he has a hot temper. Another woman was riding jealous—she actually rode *at* me ! She crossed us at a fence. He jumped wildly, and fell—fell on me, on stones. I put up my hands

(as I always do) to save my face; but in his struggles he kicked me in the back. You say I shall get better. No, my dear Cousin Gwen, I'm going to let you into a horrible secret—I shall get *worse*. I feel it. Every day I am more loglike and powerless. Oh, I am so sorry for the poor, poor pater. He and I always hunted in couples, always went everywhere together. Gwen, you will have to be a daughter to him and take my place."

Dolly's sad presentiment came true; all that winter, spring, and summer, she never left her bed, and I nursed her. At length there was a shade of improvement, and we took her abroad by easy stages, and remained there for months. She is no longer bedridden, or a helpless invalid, or chained to her sofa always.

This she declares she owes to me; but that is only a way of saying that she is

fond of me. Her own patience, fortitude, and cheerful disposition did more for her than our assiduous care and foreign baths. She will never, alas, be able to walk, to dance, to mount a horse again! She will be a cripple, more or less, as long as she lives. Nevertheless, she takes a vivid interest in life—life, in which my pretty, vivacious, warm-hearted Cousin Dolly can be but a bystander and spectator. She takes a keen interest in Everard and me. We have been engaged to be married for some time—with the full approval of both families.

Yes, Lady Hildegarde paid a three days' visit to the Chase when we returned from Germany, ostensibly to inquire for Dolly, and judge of her progress with her own eyes; but in reality to ask me (to command, exhort, and entreat, me) to be her son's wife.

For, strange as it may appear, it will be *my* hand, and not poor Dolly's, that alone can join the great Chalgrove fortune to the impoverished Somers estates!

I am mistress of a splendid establishment, with an admirable housekeeper as viceroy. And I "fell into the ways of the place," as she expressed it, with extraordinary ease.

I suppose there was something in belonging by blood to the race that had lived there for generations! Ideas, instincts, tastes, manners, are surely hereditary! Who would believe that I had spent so many sighs and tears over a much smaller domestic budget, or with what an anxious eye I had scanned the butter (salt butter) and the candles, in order to measure their consumption? Who would imagine that I knew far better than my own scullery-maid the cheap parts of meat;

and that once an unexpected deficit of two and fourpence half penny had cost me a sleepless night!

How I wished that Emma, the partner of those dark days, had been alive to enjoy the sunshine of my present prosperity!

I have not forgotten Stonebrook—nor has it forgotten me. I send punctual remembrances to Mrs. Gabb and the Mounds; and Miss Skuce clings to me. She favors me with long letters (crossed) and elaborate Christmas cards, and receives in return hampers of game and hothouse fruit. Uncle Chalgrove calls her “a kind, good, warm-hearted old soul!” and I leave him in his ignorance. I have steadily turned a deaf ear to her continual importunities and eager appeals for my photograph, and she mentions that she would “*prefer* a large one, in my court

train !” She shall never possess a picture of mine, large or small, plain or colored, for I well know how it would stand on her mantelpiece, to be criticised, explained, and talked over, and have all its poor little history garrulously related. No, never, *never* !

Everard, my cousin and *fiancé*, spends most of his time at the Chase. We are to live there altogether in the coming by and by. He and I often walk out beside Dolly’s invalid chair, and accompany her round the park, the grounds, gardens, or to her favorite haunt, the paddocks, to see the pensioners and the young horses. Among the former is Diable Vert (fat, lazy, and dead lame). Dolly was firm with respect to her former favorite, and obtained a reprieve for him, as he was being led forth to execution. He also had suffered in that dreadful accident, and is

worthless as a hunter; but he hobbles up to the gate whenever he hears the voice of his comrade in misfortune.

I know that Everard often—nay, perhaps always—wonders why I am not more cordial to his mother. She knew my own mother intimately long ago, and has repeatedly assured me, with what poor Emma called her “irresistible” manner, that she will take her old friend’s place, and be *more* than a mother to me! Naturally, I have never once referred to our unpleasant little encounter in Mrs. Gabb’s lodgings, nor to Emma, nor to India, nor to any delicate subjects. I am always civil and—I hope—agreeable. I shall never tell tales to Everard. Perhaps he may have his suspicions—who knows? Perhaps Miss Skuce took all Stonebrook into her confidence—perhaps not. But it is a curious fact, that latterly he has

ceased to urge me to pay visits to the Abbey, or to inquire why I invariably decline his mother's continual and pressing invitations to stay with her for a week or two—or even to spend *Christmas* !

THE END.

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